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MARCEL PROUST
AN ENGLISH TRIBUTE

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By JOSEPH CONRAD

ARNOLD BENNETT
ARTHUR SYMONS
COMPTON MACKENZIE
CLIVE BELL
W. J. TURNER
CATHERINE CARSWELL
E. RICKWORD
VIOLET HUNT
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J. MIDDLETON MURRY
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G. S. STREET
ETHEL C. MAYNE
FRANCIS BIRRELL
REGINALD TURNER
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MARCEL PROUST

I

INTRODUCTION

THE death of Marcel Proust in Paris on November 18, 1922, and the manner in which the news of his death was, by no means numerously, reported in London, brought into question the extent of his rumoured rather than defined influence over readers in this country. This question it was natural that I should ask myself, for I had recently published an English version of the first part of his great novel, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, and was then about half way through the translation of its sequel, *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*. The writer of a savage, though evidently sincere attack on Proust which a London newspaper published within forty-eight hours of his death seemed to assume that he had already a considerable (if misguided) following here, and it occurred to me that I might obtain, from writers who were my friends, and from others who had expressed their admiration of Proust in English periodicals, a body of critical opinion similar to that which, I learned, was being collected in Paris by the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. To test the worth of my idea, I began with the seniors.

Mr. Saintsbury—who (in this respect only) might have served as the model for the Marquis de Norpois, whose promptness in answering a letter "was so astonishing that whenever my father, just after posting one to him, saw his handwriting upon an envelope, his first thought was always one of annoyance that their letters must, unfortunately, have crossed in the post; which, one was led to suppose, bestowed upon him the special and luxurious privilege of extraordinary deliveries and collections at all hours of the day and night"—replied at once, and Mr. Conrad soon followed, with letters of which each correspondent authorised me to make whatever use I chose.

So, I must add, did Mr. George Moore, but in a letter expressive only of his own inability to stomach Proust, the inclusion here of which, even although it might make this volume a prize to collectors of first editions, would compel the excision of the word "tribute" from title-page and cover. Mr. Walkley, the doyen of English Proustians as he is of dramatic critics, and Mr. Middleton Murry put me at liberty to use articles which they were publishing in *The Times* and its *Literary Supplement*; Mr. Stephen Hudson, the most intimate English friend of Proust's later years, consented to write a character sketch; and on this base my cenotaph was soon erected.

That it is not loftier must be laid to my

account. I have doubtless refrained from approaching many willing contributors, from a natural and, I trust, not blameworthy reluctance to interrupt busy persons with whom I am not acquainted. At the same time, I found among those whom I did approach a widespread modesty which prevented a number of them from contributing opinions which would have been of the greatest critical importance. "We do not," was the general answer, "know enough of Proust to venture to tackle such a theme." This and the pressure of other work have kept silent, to my great regret, Mrs. Virginia Woolf, Miss Rebecca West, Mr. J. C. Squire, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie, Mr. Aldous Huxley, and that most reluctant writer Mr. E. M. Forster.

Their reticence should be my model. Although I cannot pretend not to have made a certain study of the text of Proust (probably the most corrupt text of any modern author that is to be found), the close scrutiny required of a translator has inevitably obstructed my view of the work as a whole. The reader of the following pages may, however, be assured that this is my private loss and will in no way be made his.

I have to thank all the contributors for the spontaneous generosity with which they have collaborated and have placed their work at my disposal. I have also to thank the proprietors and editors of the following newspapers and

reviews for permission to reprint articles which have appeared in their pages: *The Times* for Mr. Walkley's; *The Times Literary Supplement* for Mr. Middleton Murry's; *The Saturday Review* for Mr. Hussey's; *The New Statesman* for Mr. Pearsall Smith's; *The Saturday Westminster Gazette* for that of Mr. Arthur Symons; and *The Nineteenth Century and After* for Mr. Ralph Wright's.

C. K. S. M.

II

A PORTRAIT

IN trying to represent the personality of a friend to those who do not know him, one has in mind, though one may not deliberately use, a standard of reference with which he can be compared or contrasted.

In the case of Proust no such standard is available, and I find myself driven back to the frequently used but unilluminating word unique for want of a better expression. This uniqueness consisted less, I think, in his obvious possession to an outstanding degree of gifts and charms than in his use of them. Others probably have been and are as wise, witty, cultured, sympathetic, have possessed or possess his conversational powers, his charm of manner, his graciousness. But no one I have ever known combined in his own person so many attractive qualities and could bring them into play so spontaneously. Yet, while his use of these powers resulted in his eliciting the utmost fruitfulness from social intercourse, there was an impalpable objectivity about him, an aloofness felt rather than observed. It was as though the personality revealed at the particular moment was but one of many, while the dominant consciousness lay behind them, preserving its complete inviolability. It was, I believe, in the depth and capacity of this ultimate

consciousness that his uniqueness lay, as it is there that the source of his creative power and sensibility is to be found.

It seems to me that the essential element of this ultimate ego in Proust was goodness. This goodness had nothing ethical in it, must not be confounded with righteousness ; and yet, seeking another word to define its nature, purity is the only one that occurs to me. There was in him the fundamental simplicity which was typified by Dostoevsky in Myshkin, and out of it grew the intellectual integrity which governed and informed his philosophy.

He possessed that rarest gift of touching everyday people, things, and concerns with gold, imparting to them a vital and abiding interest. Anything and everything served as a starting-point, nothing was too minute to kindle idea and provoke suggestive utterance. He could do this because he was himself the most interesting of men, and because Life was one long exciting adventure to him wherein nothing was trivial or negligible. It was not that loving beauty he desired nothing else, and was seeking an aesthetic disguise for the ugly, the sordid, or the base. On the contrary, he recognised that these also are of the stuff of which humanity is made, and that truth and beauty are as often as not masked by their opposites. In him extremes were not only reconciled but united. Supremely conscious and utterly unegotistical, one may look in vain in his

work for a trace of vanity, of self-glorification, or even self-justification. He is intensely concerned with his own consciousness, he is never concerned with himself. I can think of no conversation in any of his books in which he takes other than a minor part, and of very few in which he takes any part at all. He is wholly taken up with the thing in itself, whatever it may be, regarding his consciousness as an instrument of revelation apart from himself. And as he shows himself in his books, so he was in life.

In reply to a letter in which, expressing my disappointment at not seeing him on a certain occasion, I went on to say that, much as I loved his books, I would rather see him and hear him talk than read them, he wrote me :

> Entre ce qu'une personne dit et ce qu'elle extrait par la méditation des profondeurs où l'esprit nu gît, couvert de voiles, il y a un monde. Il est vrai qu'il y a des gens supérieurs à leurs livres mais c'est que leurs livres ne sont pas des *Livres*. Il me semble que Ruskin, qui disait de temps en temps des choses sensées, a assez bien exprimé une partie au moins de cela. . . . Si vous ne lisez pas mon livre ce n'est pas ma faute ; c'est la faute de mon livre, car s'il était vraiment un beau livre il ferait aussitôt l'unité dans les esprits épars et rendrait le calme aux cœurs troubles.

His immersion in the subject of conversation or inquiry was complete ; nothing else existed until he had got to the bottom of it. But his

world was echoless ; the voice never repeated itself, and banality could not enter in, because neither formula nor classification existed for him. Just as in his eyes one particular water-lily in the Vivonne was different from any other water-lily, so each fresh experience was an isolated unit complete in itself and unlike all other units in the world of his consciousness. His mind, so far from being overlaid by obliterating layers of experience, was as a virgin soil which by some magic renews itself after each fresh crop has been harvested. This power of mental renewal pervades and gives a peculiar freshness to all that he has written. It is in essence a youthful quality which was very marked in his personality. He was penetrated with boyish eagerness and curiosity, asked endless questions, wanted always to know more. What had you heard, what did you think, what did they say or do, whatever *it* was and whoever *they* were. And there was no denying him this or anything he wanted ; he must always have his way—he always did have it, till the end of his life. And the great comfort to those who loved him is that till the last he was a glorious spoilt child. As Céleste says in *Sodome* :

> On devrait bien tirer son portrait en ce moment. Il a tout des enfants. Vous ne vieillerez jamais. Vous avez de la chance, vous n'aurez jamais à lever la main sur personne, car vous avez des yeux qui savent imposer leur volonté. . . .

This was the same Céleste who devoted her life to his service for many years and was with him to the last. After his death she wrote of him: "Monsieur ne ressemblait à personne. C'était un être incomparable—composé de deux choses, intelligence et cœur—et quel cœur!"

Knowing the intensity of his interest in and sympathy with humble lives, the suggestion of snobbishness in connexion with such a man is ridiculous. Proust, like all great artists, needed access to all human types. It is one of the drawbacks of our modern civilisation that the opportunities for varied social intercourse are limited and beset with conventional prejudices. No man went further than he did to surmount these. He knew people of the "monde" as he knew others. As he writes in *Sodome*:

> Je n'avais fait de différence entre les ouvriers, les bourgeois et les grands seigneurs, et j'aurais pris indifféremment les uns et les autres pour amis avec une certain préférence pour les ouvriers, et après cela pour les grands seigneurs, non par goût, mais sachant qu'on peut exiger d'eux plus de politesse envers les ouvriers qu'on ne l'obtient de la part des bourgeois, soit que les grands seigneurs ne dedaignent pas les ouvriers comme font les bourgeois, ou bien parce qu'ils sont volontiers polis envers n'importe qui, comme les jolies femmes heureuses de donner un sourire qu'elles savent accueilli avec tant de joie.

His friends were in fact of all classes, but his friendship was accorded only on his own terms,

and a condition of it was the capacity to bear hearing the truth. His friends knew themselves the better for knowing him, for he was impatient of the slightest insincerity or disingenuousness and could not tolerate pretence. Lies tired him. In a letter he alluded thus to one whom we both knew well :

> Ce que je lui reproche, c'est d'être un menteur. Il a fait ma connaissance à la faveur d'un mensonge et depuis n'a guère cessé. Il trouve toujours le moyen de gâter ses qualités par ces petits mensonges qu'il croit l'avantager—tout petits et quelquefois énormes.

Proust's insistence on truthfulness and sincerity caused him more than once to renounce lifelong associations. His sensibility was so delicate that a gesture or a note in the voice revealed to him a motive, perhaps slight and passing, of evasion or pretence. He was exacting about sincerity only. In other respects his tolerance was so wide that a hard truth from his lips, so far from wounding, stimulated. To his friends he was frankness itself, and spoke his mind without reserve. I once asked him to tell me if there were not some one, some friend of his, to whom I could talk about him. There was so much I wanted to know, and on the all too rare occasions when he was well enough to see me there was never time. In answer to this he wrote me :

> Si vous désirez poser quelque interrogation à une personne qui me comprenne, c'est bien simple,

> adressez-vous à moi. D'ami qui me connaisse entièrement je n'en ai pas. . . . Je sais tout sur moi et vous dirai volontiers tout; il est donc inutile de vous désigner quelque ami mal informé et qui dans la faible mesure de sa compétence cesserait de mériter le nom d'ami s'il vous répondait.

Thus in his words we reach the final conclusion that, even if Proust's friends had the power of expressing all that they feel about him, they would still be "mal informés," and would have to return to him for that deeper knowledge which only he could impart. As to this, there is his further assurance that his work is the best part of himself. Providentially, he was spared until that work was done and "Fin" on the last page was written by his own hand.

STEPHEN HUDSON.

III

THE PROPHET OF DESPAIR

IT is the privilege of those known as the world's greatest artists to create the illusion of dragging the reader through the whole mechanism of life. Such was pre-eminently the gift of Shakespeare, whose tragedies appear to be microcosms of the universe. Such a gift was that of Balzac, for all his vulgarities and absurdities, if we may treat the whole *Comédie Humaine* as a single novel. Such, in his rare moments of prodigal creation, was the power of Tolstoy, whom Proust in some ways so much resembles. Such is the gift of Proust in his astonishing pseudo-autobiography, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. For it is the sense of imaginative wealth and creative facility that is the hall-mark of the first-rate genius, who must never appear to be reaching the end of his tether, but must always, on the contrary, leave the impression of there being better fish in his sea than have ever come out of it.

The outpouring of the romantic school of authors, their neglect of form, their absence of critical faculty, their devastating facility, have made this truth disagreeable and even doubtful to many minds, who feel more in sympathy with the costive author of *Adolphe* than with the continual flux of Victor Hugo. Yet if Victor Hugo

be a great author at all, as he evidently is, it is because of this very fertility that we so much dislike ; and if Benjamin Constant be not a great artist, as he evidently is not, the reason must be sought in the absence of fertility, though we may find its absence sympathetic ; while this same fertility, which is the whole essence of Balzac, is rendering him formidable and unattractive to a generation of readers. Now, Proust was eminently fertile, and, within the limits imposed by his own delicate health, he could go on indefinitely, so profound and so all-embracing was his interest in human beings and human emotions. But he was fertile in a new way. Not for him was the uncritical spate of nineteenth-century verbiage. His intellectual integrity, of which M. C. Dubos has written so well in his *Approximations*, always compelled him to check and ponder every move upon the chessboard of life, every comment on human feelings. For Proust is the latest great prophet of sensibility, and it is bearing this in mind that we can trace the intellectual stock of which he comes.

One of the great landmarks in French literature is pegged out for us by the Abbé Prévost's translation of *Clarissa Harlowe*, which burst on the new sentimental generation, starved on the superficial brilliance of the Regnards and their successors, with all the energy of a gospel. The adoration with which this great novel was received by the most brilliant intellects of eighteenth-

century France seems to-day somewhat excessive, however deep be our sympathy with the mind and art of Richardson. Remember how Diderot speaks of him : Diderot the most complete embodiment of the eighteenth century with its sentimental idealism and fiery common sense—the man in whom reason and spirit were perfectly blended, the enthusiastic preacher of atheism and humanity :

> O Richardson, Richardson! homme unique à mes yeux. Tu seras ma lecture dans tous les temps. Forcé par les besoins pressants si mon ami tombe dans l'indigence, si la médiocrité de ma fortune ne suffit pas pour donner à mes enfants les soins nécessaires à leur éducation je vendrai mes livres, mais tu me resteras ; tu me resteras sur le même rayon avec Virgile, Homère, Euripide, et Sophocle. Je vous lirai tour à tour. Plus on a l'âme belle, plus on aime la vérité, plus on a le goût exquis et pur, plus on connaît la nature, plus on estime les ouvrages de Richardson.

The new sentimental movement, developed to such a pitch of perfection by the author of *Clarissa Harlowe*, was one of enormous value to life and art. But inevitably it was pushed much too far, and the novels of the *école larmoyante* are now well-nigh intolerable, even when written by men of genius like Rousseau, whose characters seem to spend their lives in one continual jet of tears in a country where the floodgates of ill-controlled emotion are never for an instant shut.

Rousseau had one great pupil, a great name in the history of the French novel, Stendhal. But he wore his Rousseau with a difference. For Rousseau represented, in his novels, but one side of the eighteenth century, the sentimental; but there was another, the scientific—and the life work of Stendhal consisted in an untiring effort to combine the two. For what was the avowed ambition of the self-conscious sentimentalist that was Stendhal? Soaked in the writings of Lavater, de Tracy, and the Scotch metaphysicians, crossed with a romantic passion for Rousseau and the Elizabethan drama, he wished to be as *sec* as possible, and boasted that he read a portion of the *Code Civil* every day—a document Rémy de Gourmont may be right in calling diffuse, but which is certainly not romantic. Nourished on Shakespeare, Rousseau, and de Tracy, Stendhal became one of the first completely modern men, who study the working of their minds with the imaginative enthusiasm, but also with the cold objectivity, of a scientist dissecting a tadpole. Like the young scientist in Hans Andersen, his first instinct was to catch the toad and put it in spirits; but in this case the toad was his own soul. Stendhal was too much of a revolutionary in writing ever to have been completely successful; but the immensity of his achievement may be gauged by the fact that parts of *L'Amour*, and still more of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, are really of practical value to lovers, who might profit con-

siderably in the conduct of their affairs by a careful study of Stendhal's advice, if only they were ever in a position to listen to reason. Now, this is something quite new in fiction, and would have astonished his grandfather Richardson. Proust is in turn the intellectual child of Stendhal, and has bespattered *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* with expressions of admiration for his master. In truth, he has taken over not only the methods but the philosophy of his teacher. It will be remembered that Stendhal insists in his analysis of *L'Amour-Passion* that crystallisation can only be effected after doubt has been experienced. So, for Proust, love, the *mal sacré* as he calls it, can only be called into being by jealousy, *le plus affreux des supplices*. We can want nothing till we have been cheated out of getting it; whence it follows that we can get nothing till we have ceased to want it, and in any case, once obtained, it would *ipso facto* cease to be desirable. Hence Man, "how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god," is doomed by the nature of his being to unsatisfied desire and restless misery, till Proust becomes, as I have called him above, the prophet of despair. He is a master of the agonising moments spent hanging in vain round the telephone, the weeks passed waiting for letters that never come, and the terrible reactions after one's

own fatal letter has been irrevocably posted and not all the jewels of Golconda can extract it from the pillar-box. For how does the hero of his novels finally pass under the sway of Albertine? Through agony caused by the cutting of an appointment.

> Comme chaque fois que la porte cochère s'ouvrait, la concierge appuyait sur un bouton électrique qui éclairait l'escalier, et comme il n'y avait pas de locataires qui ne fussent rentrés, je quittai immédiatement la cuisine et revins m'asseoir dans l'antichambre, épiant, là où la tenture un peu trop étroite qui ne couvrait pas complètement la porte vitrée de notre appartement, laissait passer la sombre raie verticale faite par la demi-obscurité de l'escalier. Si tout d'un coup, cette raie devenait d'un blond doré, c'est qu'Albertine viendrait d'entrer en bas et serait dans deux minutes près de moi ; personne d'autre ne pouvait plus venir à cette heure-là. Et je restais, ne pouvant détacher mes yeux de la raie qui s'obstinait à demeurer sombre ; je me penchais tout entier pour être sûr de bien voir ; mais j'avais beau regarder, le noir trait vertical, malgré mon désir passionné, ne me donnait pas l'enivrante allégresse que j'aurais eue, si je l'avais vu, changé par un enchantement soudain et significatif, en un lumineux barreau d'or. *C'était bien de l'inquiétude, pour cette Albertine à laquelle je n'avais pensé trois minutes pendant la soirée Guermantes!* Mais, réveillant les sentiments d'attente jadis éprouvés à propos d'autres jeunes filles, surtout de Gilberte, quand elle tardait à venir, *la privation possible d'un simple plaisir physique me causait une cruelle souffrance morale.*

Indeed, happiness in love is by nature impossible, as it demands an impossible spiritual relationship.

> If we thought that the eyes of a girl like that were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But we feel that what shines in those reflecting discs is not due solely to their material composition; that it is, unknown to us, the dark shadows of the ideas that the creature is conceiving, relative to the people and places that she knows—the turf of racecourses, the sand of cycling tracks over which, pedalling on past fields and woods, she would have drawn me after her, that little peri, more seductive to me than she of the Persian paradise—the shadows, too, of the home to which she will presently return, of the plans that she is forming or that others have formed for her; and above all that it is she, with her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will. I knew that I should never possess this young cyclist if I did not possess also what was in her eyes. And it was consequently her whole life that filled me with desire; a sorrowful desire *because I felt that it was not to be realised*, but exhilarating, because what had hitherto been my life, having ceased suddenly to be my whole life, being no more now than a little part of the space stretching out before me, which I was burning to cover and which was composed of the lives of these girls, offered me that prolongation, that possible multiplication of oneself, which is happiness. And no doubt the fact that we had, these girls and I, not one habit, as we had not one idea, in common, was to make it more difficult for

> me to make friends with them and to please them. But perhaps, also, it was thanks to those differences, to my consciousness that there did not enter into the composition of the nature and actions of these girls a single element that I knew or possessed, that there came in place of my satiety a thirst—like that with which a dry land burns—for a life which my soul, because it had never until now received one drop of it, would absorb all the more greedily in long draughts, with a more perfect imbibition.[1]

Proust, having thus reduced all human society to misery, builds upon the ruins his philosophy of salvation: Only by much suffering shall we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven—that is to say, shall we be enabled to see ourselves solely and simply as members of the human race, to perceive what is essential and fundamental in everybody beneath the trappings of manners, birth, or fortune, learn to be really intelligent. Love and jealousy alone can open to us the portals of intelligence. Thus, in the opening pages of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, the poor little boy, who, because M. Swann is dining with his parents, cannot receive in bed his mother's kiss, starts on the long spiritual journey which is to run parallel to that of the brilliant, unhappy *mondain* guest. Miserable at being left alone, he desperately sends down to his mother an agonised note by his nurse, and in his agitation

[1] Mr. Birrell, whose essay, though first printed in *The Dial*, was written for inclusion in this volume, has kindly consented to my substituting for the original text my own versions of this and the following quotations from *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* and *Du Côté de chez Swann* respectively.—C. K. S. M.

he hates Swann, whom he regards as the cause of his misery, and continues to reflect:

> As for the agony through which I had just passed, I imagined that Swann would have laughed heartily at it if he had read my letter and had guessed its purpose; whereas, on the contrary, as I was to learn in due course, a similar anguish had been the bane of his life for many years, and no one perhaps could have understood my feelings at that moment so well as himself; to him, that anguish which lies in knowing that the creature one adores is in some place of enjoyment where oneself is not and cannot follow—to him that anguish came through Love, to which it is in a sense predestined, by which it must be equipped and adapted; but when, as had befallen me, such an anguish possesses one's soul before Love has yet entered into one's life, then it must drift, awaiting Love's coming, vague and free without precise attachment, at the disposal of one sentiment to-day, of another to-morrow, of filial piety or affection for a comrade. And the joy with which I first bound myself apprentice, when Françoise returned to tell me that my letter would be delivered, Swann, too, had known well that false joy which a friend can give us, or some relative of the woman we love, when on his arrival at the house or theatre where she is to be found, for some ball or party or first night at which he is to meet her, he sees us wandering outside, desperately awaiting some opportunity of communicating with her.

"We brought nothing into the world," remarked the first Christian Stoic, "and it is certain we shall take nothing out of it." He might have made an exception for our personality, that

enormous anonymity, unmalleable as granite and unchanging as the ocean, which we brought along with us from a thousand ancestors and shall carry unaltered to the grave. Swann and little Proust, both endowed with sensibility, could shake hands with each other across the generations: all the experiences of one, all the innocence of the other, were as nothing beside that similarity of temperament which calls to us irrevocably, as Christ called to Matthew at the receipt of custom, and bids us share with our friend the miseries of the past and the terrors of the future.

Proust's youth was spent in Paris during that period when France was spiritually and politically severed by the *Affaire Dreyfus*, and for him the *Affaire* becomes the touchstone of sensibility and intelligence. To be a Dreyfusard means to pass beyond the sheltered harbour of one's own *clique* and interest into the uncharted sea of human solidarity. Hard indeed is the way of the rich man, the aristocrat, the snob, or the gentleman, who wishes to find salvation during the *Affaire*. He must leave behind him taste, beauty, comfort, and education, consort, in spirit at least, with intolerable Jews, fifth-rate politicians, and insufferable *arrivistes*, before worthily taking up the burden of human misery and routing the forces of superstition and stupidity. And there is only one school for this lesson, the school of romantic love—that is to say, of carking jealousy,

in the throes of which all men are equal. Little Proust himself, his bold and beautiful friend the Marquis de Saint-Loup, the eccentric and arrogant M. de Charlus, even the stupid high-minded Prince de Guermantes, who all know the meaning of romantic love, as opposed to the facile pleasure of successive mistresses, will eventually, be it only for a short moment, triumphantly stand the test. But Saint-Loup's saintly mother, Mme. de Marsantes, the rakish Duc de Guermantes and his brilliant, charming, but limited wife, will never put out to sea on the ship of misery, bound for the ever-receding shores of romantic love and universal comprehension. They will never risk their lives for one great moment, for the satisfaction of unbounded passion. Swann tortured and fascinated by his flashy *cocotte*, little Proust lacerated by the suspected infidelities of the niece of a Civil Servant, Saint-Loup in the clutches of an obscure and ill-conditioned actress of budding genius, M. de Charlus broken by the sheer brutality of his young musician: such are the people who have their souls and such are the painful schools in which Salvation is learned—the Salvation that comes from forgetting social prejudice and from not mistaking the "plumage for the dying bird," from judging people by their intrinsic merit, from making no distinction between servants and masters, between prince and peasant. For, as the author insists with almost maddening iteration, good brains and

good breeding never go together: all ultimate talent and perception is with the cads. The price to pay is heavy and incessant. A little easy happiness, a little recovery from hopeless love, a passing indifference to ill-requited affection, can undo all the good acquired by endless misery in the long course of years.

Such I take to be the fundamental thought underlying *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* in its present unfinished state, though we cannot tell what surprises the succeeding volumes (happily completed) may have in store for us. I have insisted, at perhaps excessive length, on the general mental background to this vast epic of jealousy, because it is not very easy to determine. The enormous wealth of the author's gifts tends to bury the structure under the superb splendour of the ornament. For Proust combines, to a degree never before realised in literature, the qualities of the aesthete and the scientist. It is the quality which first strikes the reader who does not notice, in the aesthetic rapture communicated by perfect style, that all pleasures are made pegs for disillusion. Human beauty, the beauty of buildings, of the sea, of the sky, the beauty of transmitted qualities in families and in the country-side, the beauty of history, of good breeding, of self-assurance—few people have felt these things as Proust. For him the soft place-names of France are implicit with memories too deep for tears. Let us take one passage among many where the

aesthete Proust is feeling intensely a thousand faint suggestions:

> Quand je rentrai, le concierge de l'hôtel me remit une lettre de deuil où faisaient part le marquis et la marquise de Gonneville, le vicomte et la vicomtesse d'Amfreville, le comte et la comtesse de Berneville, le marquis et la marquise de Graincourt, le comte d'Amenoncourt, la comtesse de Maineville, le comte et la comtesse de Franquetot, la comtesse de Chaverny née d'Aigleville, et de laquelle je compris enfin pourquoi elle m'était envoyée quand je reconnus les noms de la marquise de Cambremer née du Mesnil la Guichard, du marquis et de la marquise de Cambremer, et que je vis que la morte, une cousine des Cambremer, s'appelait Éléonore-Euphrasie-Humbertine de Cambremer, comtesse de Criquetot. Dans toute l'étendue de cette famille provinciale dont le dénombrement remplissait des lignes fines et serrées, pas un bourgeois, et d'ailleurs pas un titre connu, mais tout le ban et l'arrière-ban des nobles de la région qui faisaient chanter leurs noms—ceux de tous les lieux intéressants du pays—aux joyeux finales en *ville*, en *court*, parfois plus sourdes (en *tot*). Habillés des tuiles de leur château ou du crépi de leur église, la tête branlante dépassant à peine la voûte ou le corps-de-logis et seulement pour se coiffer du lanternon normand ou des colombages du toit en poivrière, ils avaient l'air d'avoir sonné le rassemblement de tous les jolis villages échelonnés ou dispersés à cinquante lieues à la ronde et de les avoir disposés en formation serrée, sans une lacune, sans un intrus, dans le damier compact et rectangulaire de l'aristocratique lettre bordée de noir

Such a passage contains in little the whole

history of a nation reflected in the magic mirror of a nation's country-side, equally desirable for its human suggestiveness and for its pure aesthetic worth.

And here we may pause for a moment to consider one of the most important aspects of Proust's aesthetic impulse, which is expressed in the title *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the Remembrance of Things Past. This is more than the expression of a desire to write an auto-biography, to recapitulate one's own vanishing experience. It is an endeavour to reconstruct the whole of the past, on which the present is merely a not particularly valuable comment. Royalties are interesting because they have retired from business, aristocrats because they have nothing left but their manners; the *bourgeoisie* still carry with them the relics of their old servility, the people have not yet realised their power; and a social flux results therefrom, the study of which can never grow boring to the onlooker as long as superficially the old order continues, though it represent nothing but an historic emotion. The hero as he winds along the path of his emotional experience from childhood to adolescence is pictured as avid for all these historic sensibilities which find their expression in his early passion for the Guermantes group, the most aristocratic combination of families in France. From his earliest childhood he has dreamed about them, picturing them as their ancestors, whom he has

seen in the stained-glass windows of his village church at Combray; till he has woven round them all the warm romance of the Middle Ages, the austere splendours of *Le Grand Siècle*, the brilliant decay of eighteenth-century France. But when he meets them, the courage has gone, the intelligence has gone, and only the breeding remains. It was the greatest historical disillusion in the boy's life. Yet there still hangs about them the perfume of a vanished social order, and Proust makes splendid use of his hero's spiritual adventure. As he wanders through the *salons*, fast degenerating into drawing-rooms, he becomes the Saint-Simon of the *décadence*. For Proust can describe, with a mastery only second to that of Saint-Simon himself, the sense of social life, the reaction of an individual to a number of persons, and the interplay of a number of members of the same group upon each other. His capacity for describing the manifold pleasures of a party would have stirred the envy of the great author of *Rome, Naples et Florence*. Many people can only see snobbery in this heroic effort to project the past upon the screen of the present. Yet the author is too intelligent and honest not in the end to throw away his romantic spectacles. The *Côté de Guermantes* cannot be permanently satisfying. Again bursts in the philosophy of disillusion. When he has obtained with immense labour the key to the forbidden chamber, he finds nothing but stage properties inside.

But this poet of political, economic, and social institutions is also the pure poet of Nature in another mood:

> Là, où je n'avais vu avec ma grand'mère au mois d'août que les feuilles et comme l'emplacement des pommiers, à perte de vue ils étaient en pleine floraison, d'un luxe inouï, les pieds dans la boue et en toilette de bal, ne prenant pas de précautions pour ne pas gâter le plus merveilleux satin rose qu'on eût jamais vu, et que faisait briller le soleil : l'horizon lointain de la mer fournissait aux pommiers comme un arrière-plan d'estampe japonaise ; si je levais la tête pour regarder le ciel, entre les fleurs qui faisaient paraître son bleu rasséréné, presque violent, elles semblaient s'écarter pour montrer la profondeur de ce paradis. Sous cet azur, une brise légère, mais froide, faisait trembler légèrement les bouquets rougissants. Des mésanges bleues venaient se poser sur les branches et sautaient entre les fleurs indulgentes, comme si c'eût été un amateur d'exotisme et de couleurs, qui avait artificiellement créé cette beauté vivante. Mais elle touchait jusqu'aux larmes, parce que, si loin qu'on allât dans effets d'art raffiné, on sentait qu'elle était naturelle, que ces pommiers étaient là en pleine campagne comme les paysans, sur une grande route de France. Puis aux rayons du soleil succédèrent subitement ceux de la pluie ; ils zébrèrent tout l'horizon, enserrèrent la file des pommiers dans leur réseau gris. Mais ceux-ci continuaient à dresser leur beauté, fleurie et rose, dans le vent devenu glacial sous l'averse qui tombait : c'était une journée de printemps.

But so wide-minded is this lyric poet who can speak with the voice of Claudel and of Fustel de

Coulanges, that he is also perhaps the coldest analyst who has ever devoted his attention to fiction. His knife cuts down into the very souls of his patients, as he calls into play all the resources of his wit, animosities, sympathy, and intelligence. He is a master of all the smaller nuances of social relations, of all the half-whispered subterranean emotions that bind Society together while Society barely dreams of their existence.

It is also worth remark that Proust is the first author to treat sexual inversion as a current and ordinary phenomenon, which he describes neither in the vein of tedious panegyric adopted by certain decadent writers, nor yet with the air of a showman displaying to an agitated tourist abysses of unfathomable horror. Treating this important social phenomenon as neither more nor less important than it is, he has derived from it new material for his study of social relations, and has greatly enriched and complicated the texture of his plot. His extreme honesty meets nowhere with more triumphant rewards. It is by the splendid use of so much unusual knowledge that Proust gains his greatest victories as a pure novelist. Royalty, actresses, bourgeois, servants, peasants, men, women, and children—they all have the genuine third dimension and seem to the reader more real than his own friends. The story is told of an English naval officer that he once knocked down a Frenchman for casting doubt on the chastity of Ophelia. It is to the

credit of Shakespeare's supreme genius that our sympathies are with the naval officer, for Shakespeare's characters, too, are as real to us as our parents and friends and more real than our relations and our acquaintances. But to how few artists can this praise be given, save to Shakespeare and to Tolstoy! Yet to Proust it can be given in full measure. To read *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is to live in the world, at any rate in Proust's world—a world more sensitive, variegated, and interesting than our own.

It is difficult to analyse the ultimate quality of an artist's triumph; yet such is the function of criticism, the sole justification of writing books about books. Proust, it seems to me, had the extremely rare faculty of seeing his characters objectively and subjectively at the same moment. He can project himself so far into the mind of the persons he is describing that he seems to know more about them than they can ever know themselves, and the reader feels, in the process, that he never even dimly knew himself before. At the same time he never takes sides. The warm, palpitating flesh he is creating is also and always a decorative figure on the huge design of his tapestry, just as in *Petroushka* the puppets are human beings and the human beings puppets. For Proust, though the most objective, is also the most personal of writers. As we get accustomed to the long, tortuous sentences, the huge elaboration of conscientious metaphor, the continual refining on

what cannot be further refined, we insensibly become listeners to a long and brilliant conversation by the wisest and wittiest of men. For Proust, as much as any man, has grafted the mellowness and also the exacerbation of experience on to the untiring inquisitiveness of youth. In a page of amazing prophecy, written as long ago as 1896, M. Anatole France summed up the achievement of Proust at a moment when his life work had barely begun:

> Sans doute il est jeune. Il est jeune de la jeunesse de l'auteur. Mais il est vieux de la vieillesse du monde. C'est le printemps des feuilles sur les rameaux antiques, dans la forêt séculaire. On dirait que les pousses nouvelles sont attristés du passé profond des bois et portent le deuil de tant de printemps morts. . . .
>
> Il y a en lui du Bernardin de Saint-Pierre dépravé et du Pétrone ingénu.

This is not the moment to pretend to estimate impartially his exact place and achievement in letters. For the present we can only feel his death, almost personally, so much has he woven himself into the hearts of his readers, and apply to him in all sincerity the words Diderot used of his predecessor in time:

> Plus on a l'âme belle, plus on a le goût exquis et pur, plus on connaît la nature, plus on aime la vérité, plus on estime les ouvrages de Proust.

FRANCIS BIRRELL.

IV

A SENSITIVE PETRONIUS

MARCEL PROUST died in Paris on the 18th day of November last. To many Englishmen his name is still unknown; to others his death came as a shock so great that it was as if one of their most intimate acquaintances had suddenly passed from them; and even among those who have read his works there is, in this country at least, quite pointed disagreement. On one side there are many who will confess in private, though not so willingly in public, that they have never been able to "get through" his great work; that "the man is a bore," is "undiscussable in mixed society," is "a snob," and that, if you ask their opinion, "there is too much fuss made about the fellow altogether." On the other are men, not given to overpraising the age in which they live, who unashamedly compare him with Montaigne, Stendhal, Tolstoy, and other "masters of the human heart"; and not that only, but will discuss by the hour together Swann, the Duchesse de Guermantes, Madame de Villeparisis, Bloch, M. de Charlus, Albertine, Gilberte, Odette, the impossible and indefatigable Verdurins, and a hundred of his other characters, as if they were personal friends, and as if it were of real importance to them to discover what exactly were the motives of So-and-so on such and such

an occasion, and how So-and-so else would view their actions if he knew.

The reason for these disagreements is not, perhaps, hard to find. Proust, let us own to it at once, is not every one's novelist. He is difficult to read in the sense that he does demand complete attention and considerable efforts of memory. He has an outlook on life which is bound to be unsympathetic to a good many Englishmen—and a good many Frenchmen too, for that matter. He is very "long"; and it is necessary to have read *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* more than once to be able to see the general plan for the hosts of characters and scenes that, as one reads it book by book, so vividly hold the stage. But before we attempt to discuss the book it is important to see what its author had in mind when he first sat down, a good many years ago, to start writing it.

Some one has said that the difference between a play and a novel is that while watching a play you have the privileges of a most intimate friend, but while reading a novel the privileges of God. However true this may be of the novel as it exists to-day (and, to read some modern novels, one might hardly suspect one's divine position), it is by no means true of the novel throughout its history. It is clear, if we go back far enough, for example, that with Longus, or Plutarch, or Petronius, the reader's position is very nearly as much that of a spectator as when he is watching

a play by Shakespeare. And the same thing remains roughly true of all novels up to the middle of the eighteenth century. It is not, indeed, until we come to Richardson and Rousseau that we find anything like the modern insistence on the personal and intimate life of a man or a woman as a thing valuable in itself. No one except Montaigne and Burton, neither of whom was a novelist, appears to have been introspective before that date. What mattered before was conduct; what was to matter afterwards was feeling.

But if the world had long to wait for this revolution, none has certainly taken so instantaneous an effect. Every one knows how the reading of *Clarissa Harlowe* influenced such an independent and sturdy mind as Diderot's, and what Diderot felt that day the whole of literary France was feeling on the morrow. The days of the *petits maîtres* and the epigrammatists were past, and all eyes were turned towards the rising sun of sentiment; *Le Sopha* had given place to the *Vie de Marianne*. But this advance was attended very closely by its compensating drawback.

It was perhaps necessary, if anything is ever necessary, that this newly awakened interest in the individual mind should be accompanied by a new idealism to falsify it from the outset. However this may be, there can be small doubt that the result of this revolution was a new crop of conventionalities considerably less truthful

and, as it seems to us to-day, more harmful than the old. Sentimentality had come to birth in a night. The newly discovered world was apparently too painful a spectacle to be faced, and to cover its nakedness new doctrines like "the perfectibility of man," new angles of vision like those of Romanticism, had somehow to be invented. Fifty years were to pass before another honest work of the imagination, with one exception, could come to light in France; and the author of that exception, Laclos, is as interesting a commentary on the generation succeeding Rousseau as one can find. *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is for its own or any other time an extraordinarily truthful book; the characters, as they express themselves in their letters, are not inhuman, but human monsters; not spotless, but only foolish innocents. The tragedy is moving in the modern way; you identify your feelings with those of the characters themselves. But Laclos was not satisfied with the book as it stands. He was a fervent disciple of Rousseau's, and there appears to be little doubt that the book which exists was only intended to be a picture of the "false" society in which they, and we, live, and was to be followed by another showing what men and women would immediately be like if only they could live and act "naturally." "*Le grand défaut de tous ces livres à paradoxes*," said Voltaire of Rousseau, "*n'est-il pas de supposer toujours la nature autrement qu'elle n'est ?*"

La nature telle qu'elle est—such is to be the aim of the French nineteenth-century novelists if only they can see their opportunity. It must be confessed that several of them failed. An interest in psychology had been awakened, yet one compares *Les Misérables* with *La Princesse de Clèves* and may be excused for forgetting it. Throughout the first part of the century, at any rate, it seems as if the last thing a novelist ever asked himself was, "Would I or any reasonable creature act or feel like that?" Commonsense had gone by the board again, and "the fine," "the noble," "the proud," "the pathetic," and "the touching" held the stage.

Yet great advances were made. Balzac, for all his lack of balance and for all his hasty carelessness, was giant enough to make a hundred on his own account. The "naturalists," without making any great advances in psychology, at least were in earnest in clearing out the old stage properties, in insisting that a love scene could take place as well in a railway carriage or a hansom cab at eleven o'clock in the morning as on a lake by moonlight or on a balcony at dawn. And Stendhal—but Stendhal was the first of the moderns, the master of the whole generation which is passing, and he had to wait till the 'eighties before his influence became important. Whatever is valuable in the advances that the novel has made during its latest period is valuable just in so far as it is the result of an insistence,

with Rousseau, on being interested in the intricacies of human feeling, and an equal insistence, with Voltaire, in refusing to sentimentalise them. That these are the only lines on which the novelist can advance no one would dream of asserting. But it is more particularly because Marcel Proust seems here to stand head and shoulders above his generation, and not on account of his many other merits as an artist, that he has such a passionate, if still comparatively small, following to-day.

He is, perhaps, if we return to that definition of the difference between a novel and a play, more of the essential novelist than any man has ever been. His aim is by a hundred different methods to make you know his chief characters, not as if you were meeting them every day, but as if you yourself had for the moment actually been living in their skins and inhabiting their minds. Everything possible must be done to help you to this end. You must feel the repulsions and attractions they feel; you must even share their ancestors, their upbringing, and the class in which they live, and share them so intimately that with you, as with them, they have become second nature. Nor is even this enough. The man who knows himself is not common, and to know Proust's characters as you know yourself may only be a small advance in knowledge. So every motive of importance, every reaction to whatever stimulus they receive, is analysed and

explained until your feeling will probably be, not only how well you know this being, who is in so many respects unlike you, but how far more clearly you have seen into the obscure motives of your own most distressing and ridiculous actions, how far more understandable is an attitude to life or to your neighbours that you yourself have almost unconsciously, and perhaps in mere self-protection, adopted.

But a short example of this is needed, and a short example of anything in Proust is not easy to find. A character just sketched in one volume will be developed in another, and to grasp the significance of the first sketch one has to wait for the fuller illumination of the development. And even then the short sketch is as often as not several pages of the most closely written analysis, quite impossible to quote from, or in full. There is, however, a very small character in the first book, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, who may serve. M. Vinteuil is an obscure musician of genius, living in the country. He holds his head high among his neighbours, and, on account of his daughter, refuses to meet the only other really cultured man in the district, Swann, who has made what M. Vinteuil considers a disreputable marriage. Suddenly M. Vinteuil's daughter forms a disgraceful friendship. There is scandal in the eyes of every man or woman he meets, scandal which he, poor man, knows quite well to be founded on the most deplorable facts.

> And yet, however much M. Vinteuil may have known of his daughter's conduct, it did not follow that his adoration of her grew any less. The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished; as it was not they that engendered those beliefs, so they are powerless to destroy them; they can aim at them continual blows of contradiction and disproof without weakening them; an avalanche of miseries and maladies coming, one after another, without interruption, into the bosom of a family will not make it lose faith either in the clemency of its God or in the capacity of its physician. But when M. Vinteuil regarded his daughter and himself from the point of view of the world, and of their reputation, when he attempted to place himself by her side in the rank which they occupied in the general estimation of their neighbours, then he was bound to give judgment, to utter his own and her social condemnation in precisely the terms which the inhabitants of Combray most hostile to him and his daughter would have employed; he saw himself and her in "low," the very "lowest water," inextricably stranded; and his manners had of late been tinged with that humility, that respect for persons who ranked above him and to whom he must now look up (however far beneath him they might hitherto have been), that tendency to search for some means of rising again to their level, which is an almost mechanical result of any human misfortune.

The quotation is chosen on account of its shortness, and there are perhaps many hundred other examples which, could they be quoted in full, would show more fully this essential differ-

ence between the novel as Proust understands it and the older novel or the play. Here, at least, we have his method compressed. We have M. Vinteuil's unshakable faith in his daughter, as a jumping-off ground, founded on the past and unaltered by the facts of the present. We have also the pitying attitude of the world to himself and its hostile attitude to his daughter. And from this comes M. Vinteuil's other feeling, no less strong than his faith in his daughter, that they two have somehow sunk, become degraded, not only in the eyes of the world, but also, and because of it, in their own eyes as well. Lastly, as a reaction from this, we have the effect of these feelings on M. Vinteuil's manner—his attitude of humility before the world for sins that he has not committed, for the conduct of a person in whom he still completely believes, which, however ridiculous to the logician, can only be recognised by the rest of us as most disquietingly true to our own experience. It is this complexity in our emotions, this capability of feeling many different things at the same time about any one particular incident or person, that the novel alone can give; and it is on these lines that Marcel Proust has adventured farther than any other man.

And here, of course, he has great advantages. Proust, unlike so many of the great creative artists, started late in life the work by which he will be judged. He is mature as few great men have been mature, cultured as still fewer

have been cultured. Wide reading is far from common among great artists. The driving force necessary to the accomplishment of any work of art is seldom found in alliance with wide culture; that, more often than not, is to be found among the world's half-failures. Neither Shakespeare, nor Molière, nor Fielding, nor Richardson, nor Balzac, nor Dickens, nor Dostoevsky, nor Ibsen was a widely cultured man. In Shakespeare, the loss is more than compensated by surety of intuition. In Balzac, there is a lack of the critical faculty that makes it possible for him, even towards the end of his life, to give in the same year one thing as beautiful as *Eugénie Grandet* and another as puerile as *Ferragus*, that allows him to compare the novels of "Monk" Lewis with *La Chartreuse de Parme* and to call Maturin "*un des plus grands génies de l'Europe*."

But Proust, like Montaigne and like Racine, besides having an extreme sensitiveness to all forms of beauty and ugliness, happiness and misery, that he has met in his social existence, has also read widely in the works of other sensitive men, has compared their impressions with each other and with his own, has learnt from their successes and failures; he is armed with more than his natural equipment, has more eyes to see through than his own. Actually his books are filled from end to end with criticisms of music, of painting, of literature, not in the way that is unfortunately familiar in this country, as un-

assimilated chunks in the main stream of the narrative, but as expressions of the opinions of different characters.

This is not the only, nor indeed the chief, advantage that a wide experience in other arts, and other men's art, has given him. What is of more importance is the attitude that springs from it of seeing historically the age and society in which he lives. Nothing for him stands still, not even to-day; and, because he realises that to-day itself will to-morrow be only part of the stream of the past, he can view it with the same calmly passionate interest as that which we bring to the discoveries at Luxor. As few men are to-day, he appears to be "*au-dessus de la mêlée*," not, like the ancient gods, "careless of mankind," but curious, acutely sympathetic, and able at any moment to bring his own experience and the experience of a thousand other men in tens of other centuries to the understanding of one small case at the tiny point of time which is momentarily under his observation.

To give any idea of the plot of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*—and it has a plot, and a very closely knit one, too (how closely one only begins to realise after several re-readings)—is, of course, out of the question. Its form is that of an imaginary autobiography, and it is obvious that much genuine autobiography is inextricably woven with work of imagination. The first book (*Du Côté de chez Swann*) is occupied in part by

memories of childhood, and in part, as it seems at first, by another story altogether, the account of a love affair of M. Swann's. Of course this story is not a mere excrescence, but it is only slowly, as the later books are read, that we begin to see Proust's immense cunning in introducing us early in the novel to Swann's affairs. For they have a purpose beyond the fact that Swann becomes in time a friend of the young man, who is then in his childhood, and beyond the fact that he is very intimately mixed up with many others of the most important characters in the book. And this purpose is that of a prelude to the later and fuller story. It is, as it were, a standing example at the outset of the truism that no one ever learns by the mistakes of others—that what has been will be again in the next generation, with only the mere outward changes which time and place impose. In the second book (*A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*) we accompany the hero (it is one of the significant curiosities of Proust, akin to his refusal to divide his book into chapters, that never once is this hero named in the whole course of the work) to the seaside, and feel with him the emotions of an acutely sensitive boy just growing into manhood. And the remaining books are all occupied more or less with his efforts to assimilate the new social worlds in Paris and at Balbec Plage which are opening out before his curious and very sharply observant eyes.

There are those who, after enjoying the first two books, have complained rather bitterly of the succeeding ones. One charge against Proust seems to be that he deals more than is necessary with what are called " unpleasant " subjects and people; another is clearly, though not usually put into so few words, that he is a snob. As regards the first charge, it is true that Proust, like most French writers, is apt to claim with Terence, *Humani nihil a me alienum puto*; to urge that he is ever coarse, that he is ever anything, in fact, but extremely discriminating in his touch, is, as a matter of fact, absurd. But the other charge is more valuable because, while mistaken, it does emphasise a side of Proust's interests in life which is of some considerable significance. It is true that Proust is extremely interested not only in individuals but in those extensions of personality which are classes, cliques, bodies of men and women, which, however formed, by coming together succeed in developing a sort of communal outlook upon life. It is true also that a good deal of the book is occupied with two of these classes in particular, both of them rich, the aristocracy and the pushing *bourgeoisie* that likes to employ the artist and the intellectual as " stepping-stones from their dead selves to higher things." But to call this interest snobbery is, surely, a sign of rather careless reading. It is to assume that the *naïveté* of the young man's first adoration of the old families of France, long

before he had learnt to know them, is, in fact, the attitude of Proust himself. Even in the case of the young man snobbery seems a hard term for his actual state of mind.

> Nor could we ever reach that goal to which I longed so much to attain, Guermantes itself. I knew that it was the residence of its proprietors, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, I knew that they were real personages who did actually exist, but whenever I thought about them I pictured them to myself either in tapestry, as was the "Coronation of Esther" which hung in our church, or else in changing rainbow colours, as was Gilbert the Bad in his window, where he passed from cabbage green when I was dipping my fingers in the holy-water stoup, to plum-blue when I had reached our row of chairs; or again altogether impalpable, like the image of Geneviève de Brabant, ancestress of the Guermantes family, which the magic lantern sent wandering over the curtains of my room or flung aloft upon the ceiling—in short, always wrapped in the mystery of the Merovingian age, and bathed, as in a sunset, in the orange light which glowed from the resounding syllable *antes*. And if in spite of that they were for me, in their capacity as a duke and duchess, real people, though of an unfamiliar kind, this ducal personality was in its turn enormously distended, immaterialised, so as to encircle and contain that Guermantes of which they were duke and duchess, all that sunlit "Guermantes way" of our walks, the course of the Vivonne, its water-lilies and its overshadowing trees, and an endless series of hot summer afternoons.

Is there any wonder that this young poet—

and he was very young—when first he meets the Duchess in real life, and is welcomed into the select circle of her friends, should feel tremendously excited? But snob is not the right word.

As a fact, of course, what these complainants have missed is the use to which this aristocratic circle has been put in the life-history of the hero. For Proust, like any writer that can be read over and over again, has stamped his work through and through with his own peculiarly coloured personal psychology. And if there is one theme that is being insistently played throughout the whole work (like Swann's and Odette's phrase from Vinteuil's sonata), in incident after incident, in the adventures of one character after another, it is that theme of sadness that no ideal state is attainable in this world, not so much because we cannot climb, nor even because the ideal becomes illusion on attainment, but because the object to which we attach our ideal is, of necessity, not seen as it really is, but always as we long for it to be. This, with its complement that the mere fact of not being able to possess may lead to desire even when the object in itself does not seem very desirable, is at the very heart of Proust's philosophy.

This worship of his hero's for aristocracy is only an incident in this continual theme. It is in essence exactly the same as all his other deceptions. When Gilberte was the beautifully dressed child of his idol, Swann, surrounded by a halo

of romance owing to her friendship with the writer Bergotte, and when she appeared to look down on his advances, there was nothing on earth he would not give, nothing he would not do, to obtain her friendship. Yet when once that friendship is attained the interest in her fades away imperceptibly till she plays no more part in his life than a memory of what was once so bitterly wanted. So it is with the *petite bande* of young girls at Balbec while it presented a united and exclusive front to the world. So it is with the chief of that band, Albertine herself. Desirable while she has held aloof, she becomes through knowledge, through the loss of that mystery which had existed, as it always does, not in her, but only in him who longed for her, almost boring. He is on the point of leaving her, of finishing with the *liaison* once and for all. Suddenly all is changed. He has reason to doubt her complete faithfulness to him. With the pain of this doubt love is once more awakened, and at the end of the last published volume we leave him on the point of rushing off to Paris to marry her. This, again, is the whole meaning of Swann's marriage with the vulgar and impossible Odette de Crécy. It is the continual theme of all the pitiable deceptions of M. de Charlus. " Besides," he says in one place,

> the mistresses with whom I have been most in love have never coincided with my love for them. True love it must have been, since I subordinated every-

> thing else in the world to the chance of seeing them, of keeping them to myself, and would burst into tears if, one evening, I had heard them speak. But they themselves must be regarded rather as endowed with the property of arousing that love, of raising it to its paroxysm, than as being its embodiments. . . . You would have said that a virtue which had nothing to do with them had been arbitrarily attached to them by Nature, and that this virtue, this quasi-galvanic power, had the effect on me of exciting my love—that is to say, of controlling all my actions and causing all my sorrows. But from this the looks or the brains or the favours shown me by these women were entirely distinct.

It is in this setting, then, that one must think of the young man's fascination by what was after all far the most socially charming circle that he could have entered. The desire for a real aristocracy, not merely of brains, but surrounded by all the wealth of history and legend, is understandable enough. The only doubt is whether its representatives exist. But in Proust himself the charm undoubtedly is a subtler thing than that. It has something of the appeal of a dead religion for him. While it was still a power in the world one would have found him in opposition, as the Prince de Guermantes found himself in opposition to the army authorities when at last, and at such pain to himself, he began to suspect their conduct of the Dreyfus case. But aristocracy as a power in France is dead; it is only the ritual, the historic associations, the complete

existence of a little world within a world, that remain.

Nor, as a fact, is this interest in cliques by any means confined to the aristocracy. Of at least equal importance are the Verdurins, who, in spite of their riches, are at the very opposite pole of civilisation. And yet with all their vulgarity, with all their intellectual snobbery, with all their lack of taste and breeding, with all their affectation of being a *petit clan*, is it not clear that, up to a certain point at any rate, intelligence is on their side of the ledger? Again, there is that glance at life in barracks, through the mediation of Saint-Loup, which, while small, is as good a summary of the military world as one knows. There are some unforgettable pages on the Jews. There is even that little world of the hotel servants that has plainly interested Proust almost as much as any of the larger worlds he has spent so much care in describing. And, especially in the early books, there are those descriptions of the world of the young man's parents and grandparents, so typical of the *honnête bourgeoisie*, so profoundly drawn in their uprightness and their rather limited social ideas, so secure and anxious for security, so loving to their boy and yet so anxious not to "spoil" him. Never, with the exceptions of Saint-Simon and Tolstoy, has any author succeeded so well in giving the atmosphere of a particular house or a particular party; never has any one analysed so

closely the behaviour of people in small homogeneous masses.

In 1896, when Proust was still a young man, he produced a book which, while not of great interest in itself, is naturally of value to students of his work, both for what it contains in the germ, and for what it omits, of the Proust who was to become a master. And to this book Anatole France wrote a charming preface, in which he said various things which must have appeared more friendly than critical to readers of that day. Among other things he wrote the following words:

> Il n'est pas du tout innocent. Mais il est sincère et si vrai qu'il en devient naïf et plaît ainsi. Il y a en lui du Bernardin de Saint-Pierre dépravé et du Pétrone ingénu.

The words are a singularly good description of the Proust that we know to-day. He is not innocent, and he remains *naïf*. There is a story of how in his last illness he insisted on being muffled up in a carriage and driven out into the country to see the hawthorn, which was then in bloom. The freshness of joy in all beautiful things remained with him, so far as we can see, to the end of his life. It is as obvious in the moving account of the Prince de Guermantes' confession to Swann at the beginning of the last book as it is in the early Combray chapters of the first. He was supremely sensitive and con-

tinually surprised by beauty. But, unlike most sensitive people, he neither railed at mankind, nor shut himself up, nor built for himself a palace of escape from reality in his own theorising about the meaning of it all. He set himself to observe and to note his observations.

In many ways Anatole France's description of him as the ingenuous Petronius of our times is extremely intelligent. And our times are in many ways extremely like the days in which Petronius wrote. There is an aristocracy that has lost its *raison d'être*, and a continual flow of new plutocrats without traditions, without taste, without any object in life beyond spending to the best of their power of self-advertisement. The faith in the old social order has gone, and nothing new has arisen to take its place. Where we differ entirely from that age is in self-consciousness. And that, too, is where a modern Petronius must differ from the old one. For better in some ways and for worse in others, we are far more complex than we have ever been; our motives are at once more mixed and more clearly scrutinised. And a writer who can satisfactorily cram this age within the pages of a book must not only be extremely intelligent and extremely observant, but must also have forged for himself a style capable of expressing the finest shades of feeling; he must refuse the easy simplifications both of the moralist and the maker of plots; he must be infinitely sensitive and infinitely

truthful. That Marcel Proust personifies this ideal no one would completely claim. But he does, at least to some people, seem to have approached it more nearly than any other writer of our time.

RALPH WRIGHT.

V

THE "LITTLE PROUST"

TO those of us who have read or who are now reading Proust's enormous novel, it is a curious experience to turn back to his earliest publication, to the book written by the precocious boy whose social successes are described at such length in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. This book, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, appeared in 1896, seventeen years before the publication of *Du Côté de chez Swann*. *Les Plaisirs* is a large, shiny volume, a pretentious "tome" for the drawing-room, printed in the most expensive manner, and made hideously elegant by Madeleine Lemaire's illustrations of the *higlif* of the 'nineties—an amazing *élite* of melancholy great ladies, exquisitely fashionable in costumes which time, with its ironic touch, has made inconceivably out of fashion and dowdy. A few copies of this large book appeared recently in the London bookshops, when its rarity and value seem not to have been known; and one of these copies has come, in the happiest manner, into my possession. It contains the literary exercises and first attempts of the "little Proust" of the great novel, some verses of no especial merit, a few stories and set pieces of description, and a number of short poems in prose. These pieces were all written, the author tells us,

between his twentieth and his twenty-third year; the style is somewhat sententious, immature and precious: it is the writing of a boy—but, one sees at once, of a boy of genius. For here, not only in their bud, but in their first exquisite flowering, we find all the great qualities of Proust's later work: the beautiful sensibility, the observation, as of an insect with an insect's thousand eyes, the subtle and elaborate study of passion, with its dawn, its torments of jealousy, and—what is so original in the great novel—the analysis, not only of falling in love, but of falling out of it—the slow, inevitable fading away of the most fiery passion into the coldest indifference. Indeed, most of the themes, and often the very situations, of the later work are not only adumbrated but happily rendered in this boyish volume—the romantic lure of the world and its heartless vulgarity, the beauty of landscapes, of blossoming trees and hedges and the sea, the evocative power of names, the intermittences of memory, the longing of the child for its mother's good-night kiss, the great dinner-party, with all the ambitions and pretences of hosts and guests cynically analysed and laid bare. And here, too, we find something which, to my mind, is of even greater interest, and about which, as Proust's other critics have hardly mentioned it, a few words may not be out of place.

When the little Proust plunged into the full stream of his Parisian experiences, he was, we

are told by one of his friends, already, from his early studies, steeped in the philosophy of Plato; and although his feverish days were filled with love affairs and worldly successes, and he drained to its dregs, as we say, the enchanting cup of life, all that he felt and saw seems but to have confirmed in that precocious boy the lesson which Plato had already taught him—the lesson, namely, that the true meaning of life is never to be found in immediate experience; that there is another reality which can only be envisaged by the mind, and, as it were, created by the intellect—a deeper and more ultimate reality, in the presence of which life no longer seems contingent, mediocre, mortal, and its vicissitudes are felt to be irrelevant, its briefness an illusion. Certainly, in that great battle between the Giants and the Gods, which Plato describes in the *Sophist*, the battle in which the Giants affirm that only those things are real which can be touched and handled, while the Gods defend themselves from above out of an unseen world, "mightily contending" that true essence consists in intelligible ideas—in this eternal warfare Proust is found fighting as conspicuously as Shelley on the side of the Gods. Hope for him, as for Shelley,

> creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;

and it is this attitude towards life, this creative contemplation of experience, which to my mind

gives its deeper significance to Proust's work, and lends an importance and depth of meaning to the youthful and rather shabby love-affairs, the fashionable wickednesses and worldlinesses, which form so large a part of his subject-matter. What was Proust's ultimate "intention" in writing his great novel, the intention which, when fulfilled, will give, we must hope, a final and satisfying form to this immense creation, must remain a matter of conjecture until the complete work is before us. There is, however, much to indicate that when he retired from the world to sift and analyse his boyish experience, it was with the purpose to disengage from that flux of life and time the meanings implicit in it—to recover, to develop in the dark room of consciousness, and re-create the ultimate realities and ideals which experience reveals, though it never really attains them. The title of the whole work, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and that of its ultimate and yet unpublished volume, *Le Temps retrouvé*, seem indeed to suggest some such purpose.

That there is something irremediably wrong in the present moment; that the true reality is the creation of desire and memory, and is most present in hope, in recollection and absence, but never in immediate experience; that we kill our souls by living, and that it is in solitude, in illness, or at the approach of death that we most truly possess them—it is on these themes, which

are repeated with deeper harmonies and richer modulations throughout his later work, that the young Proust harps in this divinely fresh overture to the masterpiece which was to follow. Surely, one thinks, a book of such exquisite promise and youthful achievement, heralded as it was to the world by Anatole France's preface, and talked of, no doubt, in all the Paris salons, must have produced a remarkable impression on people so cultivated as the Parisians, so alert to discover and appreciate literary merit. However, as we know, it produced no such impression; in spite of Anatole France's praise, no one seems to have had any real notion of its importance, or to have guessed that a new genius had appeared, a new star had arisen. And when, after publishing this large, shiny, unappreciated volume, its author disappeared from the world into a solitary sick-room, he seems to have been thought of (as far as he was thought of at all) as a pretentious, affected boy who had been made a pet of for a while in worldly salons—a little dilettante with his head turned, who had gone up like a rocket in the skies of fashion, but would be heard of no more in the world of letters, where anyhow this pretty coruscation had attracted almost no attention. This seems to have been the impression of even those among Proust's personal friends who were themselves writers, and who, on re-reading *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, are now amazed, as M. Gide confesses, that they should have been

so blind to its beauty when they first read it—that in the first eagle-flights of this young genius they had seen little more than the insignificant flutterings of a gay butterfly of fashion.

When we read the lives of the great artists of the past, we are apt to be amazed at the indifference of their contemporaries to their early achievements; and we cannot believe that we too, in the same circumstances, would have been equally undiscerning. But here, happening in our own days, is an obvious instance of this contemporary blindness; and I, at least, as I read the little Proust's first volume, and see spread so clearly before me, as in the light of a beautiful dawn, the world of his creation, try to make myself believe that if the noontide of his genius had never illuminated that world and made it familiar to me, that if Proust had never lived to write Swann and the Guermantes, I too should be as blind as were his friends to its beauty and merits. I tell myself this, and yet, with the book before me, I cannot believe it. But then I remind myself of what I already know very well, that new dawns in art are apt to appear on just the horizons towards which we are not looking, and to illuminate landscapes of which we have as yet not the slightest knowledge; and that it is only afterwards, when the master's whole *œuvre* is familiar to us, that we can see the real merits of his early attempts, and read back into them the meaning and value of his complete and

acknowledged achievement. The moral of all this (and it is pleasant to end, if possible, one's reflections with a moral)—the moral is that we do not know, we cannot know, what those disquieting persons, our younger contemporaries, are really up to; that we must "look to the end," as the old saying has it; and that in the first attempts of other youths who, like Proust, were endowed with genius, but whose gifts, unlike his, came to no fruition, we possess no doubt early masterpieces of which we can have no conception, worlds of the imagination which actually exist and shine in the light of an exquisite dawn before our eyes, although our eyes cannot see them.

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH.

VI

A READER'S GRATITUDE

A FRENCH uncle of mine once took me as a boy to visit a distinguished mathematician who lived with his melons and his roses on the outskirts of a small town in the Lyonnais. On the way thither I was admonished not to interrupt with foolish questions what I was given to suppose would be an important inquiry by two learned men into the origin of the universe: Monsieur X—— would never have me inside his house again if I could not behave myself better than most of the children of the present day. We waited for our host in a large musty room of subdued sunlight, where not even a fly buzzed and where the only hint of life was the shadow of a passing bird across the yellow blind or the quivering filigree of a reflected bough. Presently Monsieur X—— came in to greet us; but without showing any inclination to discuss philosophy with my uncle he led us to some chairs and a table set out upon the sparse turf under what I think must have been a big catalpa tree. Here he heaped my plate with cakes and fruit and sweets, insisted that I was old enough to drink two glasses of a cordial, and, when he did begin to talk, talked most entertainingly about his neighbours.

Gratitude may be childhood's greatest em-

barrassment; not merely the verbal expression of thanks, but the emotion itself, which the more deeply it is felt, the more miserably it is involved in shame. As we grow older, we learn what is called politeness; and although we are still capable of being confused by and of actually suffering from excess of gratitude, we have learnt to cover that speechless confusion and pain with a glib phrase like 'I do not know how to thank you.' But the child's silence does convey the depth of his gratitude; and even as I hung my head in silent embarrassment when I was invited to thank Monsieur X—— for his kindness, so now when I ought to be thanking Marcel Proust, against interrupting whose discourse I have been as it were warned by the respect accorded to him by our uncles the critics, but who when I met him as a reader filled my plate with one delicious fruit and sweet and cake after another (steeped those cakes in tisane of limeflowers or tea), I feel incapable of expressing gratitude; and I fear to indulge in criticism, lest I should be just one more uncle standing between Proust and that innocent, appreciative, timorous, awkward child, the public.

If I say that I regard Proust as the only completely satisfying poetical record, the most important literary phenomenon of our time, I feel that I am involved in an argument with people who think that the relentless effusion of modern verse has more significance than, let us

say, a bath tap which has been left running. And I simply do not want to argue about what I enjoy. If I say that Proust represents the apex hitherto reached by the feminine or realistic art of this age, just as Stendhal represents the culmination of the masculine or ideological art of the eighteenth century, or that Proust arrives at the general through an incredibly sensitive exploration of the particular, whereas Stendhal achieves the particular by his exquisite consciousness of the general, I am involved in a lecture. And I simply do not want to lecture about what I enjoy. The trouble is that, in order to demonstrate Proust to people who have not read him, one ought to have as subtle a power of evocation, as rich a manner of suggestion as Proust himself, who could, I believe, make even a dream interesting, so that we should live in that dream and extract from it the essential flavour of its peculiarity as authentically as the dreamer. That is why Proust writes of childhood with such magic. He manages to recognize, in the complication of events that merely occur and are forgotten, the ideal duration in which they were imbedded and which gave them their material weight and spiritual portentousness. It is only in childhood, or at any rate only in isolated fragments of time later, that we possess at all intimately this sense of duration when objects appeal to us as their essential selves, as pure energies. At other periods we value them according as they forward our lives, according as they

are useful to us, and thus we lose our sense of their independent existence. I have just read once more the Combray chapter (marvellously enshrined in a translation that, like the translation of a saint's bones, destroys not a bit of their efficacy), and I have laid it aside, thinking of Leopardi's *Ricordanze* and listening to where, under the scintillations of the Great Bear,

> *sotto al patrio tetto*
> *sonavan voci alterne, e le tranquille*
> *opre de' servi.*

COMPTON MACKENZIE.

VII

GILBERTE

THEIR eyes meet across a hedge when she is still a little girl. In his eyes the look is one of appeal unconsciously, in hers of ironic indifference and contempt. He hears her name called: "Gilberte"; and she obeys instantly without turning to look back in his direction, leaving him with a disturbing enervating memory, the sense suddenly appreciated of things distant and intangible, of a world withheld from him. And that brief encounter sets the tone of their relations. She is always very largely a creature of his imagination, a window through which he can see but cannot reach immortal pastures. Never in the sense that Odette is, does she become a personality to him. Consequently to the reader she appears only in intermittent flashes of reality: when she gives him the marble that has the same colour as her eyes; when they wrestle for the letter—their feelings one shy articulation—and she says, "You know, if you like, we might go on wrestling for a little"; when in spite of her grandfather's anniversary and her father's disapproval she insists on going to a concert: in her impatience at being kept from a dancing lesson by her lover's unexpected visit.

And when we recall the endless pains expended, through Swann's love for her, on Odette,

on the making indeed a mirror of that love for the woman by whom it was inspired and from whom it drew its strength and weakness, we realise that purposely the author has left of Gilberte "a loveliness perceived in twilight, a beauty not clearly visioned"; that he considered the emotions felt for her not to be a response to any emanation from herself; but that she was rather a focus, a rallying-point, for the aspirations and intimations of boyhood; that she was in herself uninteresting, filling rather than creating a position in the life of the "moi" of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Throughout the episode the reader's attention is fixed always on the "moi," on the detailed analysis of his love: its ebb and flow; its dawn of timidity and reverence and hopeless longing; its discontent; its substitution for love of friendship; its oblique and unrepeated essay, in the wrestle, towards a physical expression; the resignation for its sake of a diplomatic career which would carry him from Gilberte; the disagreement over a trifle; the gradual recognition of its failing power, and the final realisation that those emotions of his, which he had considered in the light of a gift to Gilberte, as her permanent possession, had returned to him, to be showered in time, but in a different form, before another woman. This particular series of emotions, so familiar and yet, belonging as it does to Jurgen's enchanted garden between dawn and sunrise, so distant; this love that must, in John Galsworthy's phrase, "become

in time a fragrant memory—a searing passion—a humdrum mateship—or once in many times vintage full and sweet with sunset colour on the grapes," Marcel Proust has in the last pages of *Du Côté de chez Swann* and the first part of *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* presented in unfaltering analysis.

It is a series of emotions that has been treated many times and has inspired more than one masterpiece of the world's literature. For, whatever else in life comes twice, that does not come. Love may advance down the years often enough and gaily enough, "overthrowing all ancient memories with laughter": the passions of maturity may be deeper, stronger, less impermanent. But the particular charm of that first flowering is irrecapturable. Whence its unique fascination for the novelist. To compare Proust's treatment of it with that of other writers —with, for example, Turgenev's beautiful *First Love*—would be a forlorn and foolish business. To praise the one at the expense of the other would be to blame a big writer for failing to achieve a thing at which he never aimed. Those who find themselves in sympathy with Proust's methods, who recognise in the technique of his work a new formula, in its style a new prose rhythm, and in the spirit of it an alert and original intelligence, will always look on Gilberte as one of his most fortunate successes.

ALEC WAUGH.

VIII

PROUST'S WOMEN

THE literature of imagination has always been rich in autobiography, confessed and unconfessed. It is in its essence, perhaps one should say in its impulse, largely an affair of passionate reminiscence. Taken, therefore, as merely a recent writer of distinction who has chosen to deal avowedly with *Things Remembered*, Proust must challenge comparison with dozens of eminent men, his forerunners and contemporaries. Tolstoy has given us his own life-history, not only diffusively throughout his novels and pamphlets, but in that wonderful piece of reconstruction, *Childhood and Youth*. Among living men, James Joyce, with an epic gift and an heroic feat of memory, has recorded for us an impression of his past, physical, mental, spiritual, and has shown it interwoven with countless other lives. And these are two taken at random. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*—Proust was not the first, nor will he be the last, to choose it as a theme.

Where Proust stands as yet alone is in his manner of approaching his theme. Or, with more exactitude it may be said, his manner, vigilantly passive, eagerly quiescent, of letting his theme encroach upon and claim him. All attempted recapture of the past is for him "futile,"

a "labour in vain." Not reconstruction, but understanding of things remembered, is his aim. And to this end with deliberation he permits himself what the realist rejects but the plain man all unknowingly cherishes—the glamour in which for every one of us our own past is bathed. Divest the past, Proust seems to say, of the present's gift to it—the light that never was on sea or land—and you take away its essence; treat the present as independent of the past and you destroy its integrity. That this is true we, as human beings—acting, thinking, receiving impressions from moment to moment—must recognise when it is pointed out. Our actual existence is not so much a narrative as a web in which the shuttle of events flies back and forth between the warp and woof of past and present, from neither of which it can escape any more than can we ourselves. The trouble is that it is pointed out so seldom, and least of all perhaps by novelists, who in this matter still lag far behind our common human experience. The grasp with which Proust has laid hold upon the philosophic and aesthetic values of memory—as, for example, in the passage where he describes the eating, after an interval of many years, of a *petite madeleine* soaked in tea—is a new thing in literature. Here is pre-eminently the novelist with a past. None before him has taken *Things Remembered* not merely for theme but for medium as well.

To forget this, or even for one moment to

minimise it, in speaking of Proust, is utterly to lose one's bearings. But, accustomed as we are in our own hearts to his treatment of the past, we are so unaccustomed to it in literature that it is really not easy to avoid the artificial standpoint, the more that Proust proclaims his naturalism neither explicitly nor by freakishness of style. So quiet, so classical is his bearing that it hardly strikes one to investigate his premises.

And so, concerning his long book of memory, one hears questions put by intelligent and even admiring readers. There are his "shadowy" women—"Did women at any time mean anything to Proust?": there is his disconcerting chronology —"How old is his hero supposed to be during such or such an incident?": there is his social pose— "Was Proust not himself as bad a snob as any he describes?" But such questions can be asked only in forgetfulness, answered only in constant remembrance of the author's unique attitude toward his main subject, the past.

It is because of this that, though setting out to make a few observations upon Proust's women, I feel it no digression if I draw attention here to a particular passage which occurs early in the novel, towards the end of the *Combray* section in Volume I.—a passage in which he not merely gives the circumstances of his hero's first literary composition, but puts before us the composed fragment itself. A few pages back and the boy has been bemoaning that, his choice of a literary

career notwithstanding, his mind is blank of subjects, his intellect, at the mere idea of writing, a void. Now, suddenly, while out driving, he is so deeply enthralled by the charm of three steeples which withdraw and advance, disappear and reappear, always in different relations to each other, according as the setting sun catches their angles and the carriage winds along the country road, that words leap to frame themselves in his head and, for all the jolting and inconvenience of the moment, he must immediately write them down to "appease his conscience and to satisfy his enthusiasm."

The actual piece of prose so written is reproduced, says the narrator, "with only a slight revision here and there." We may allow ourselves, I think, the presumption that it is substantially a true record.[1] Certainly it furnishes us with the key to the whole work. Passages from Proust more exquisite, even more characteristic, might easily be found; none so significant. Those ever-veering steeples, sometimes before, sometimes behind, lightening, darkening, changing, looking now like three golden pivots, now like three birds perched on the plain—they reveal, more fully and subtly than could any philosophic exposition, both the method and the philosophic preoccupation of the author. They declare that for him there was never an actual but always a

[1] See, however, my foot-note on page 106 and *Pastiches et Mélanges*, pp. 91-99.—C. K. S. M.

psychological perspective, and that *peculiar to himself*. This is why there is no intellectual or logical means of checking Proust's observations. Either we accept them as he gives them, emotionally, or we reject them as meaningless. He has, he repeatedly tells us, no faith in intellectual observation, neither will he presume upon logical deduction in questions of human feeling. He quietly discards that assumption of god-like knowledge for which we have come to look so confidently in our writers of fiction. He will have none of the sympathetic imagination that "puts itself in another's place." He refuses as an act of disingenuousness either to project himself into or to interpret the character of another. "We alone," he says, "by our belief that they have an existence of their own, can give to certain of the things that we see a soul which they afterwards keep, which they develop in our minds." Essentially, that is to say, he believes he can know nothing outside of his own sensations, and for him every sensation is inextricably interwoven with memory. Whether he writes of a woman or a musical theme, of a love affair or of trees in the park, he never forgets that in the very act of observing there are several elements to be reckoned with. The thing observed may seem to casual eyes fixed like the three steeples. But Proust knows better. He knows that he himself is moving, that within him his past is in a different kind of motion, dictating, suggesting, comparing,

reminding, side-tracking, and that therefore the steeples themselves are never in reality still. Nothing in life is stable. Within the flux of our past and our present, figures outside ourselves seem to rise, to move, to act. But such movements have reality only in so far as they are reflected in the unique mirror of a soul. And for Proust this mirror is combined of the individual and his memory.

No wonder if such a novelist is sometimes called difficult. He is too like life to be easy. Other novels, beside his, seem accommodatingly static, other characters finished, understood in each spring of each action—precisely as those we know in life are never finished or understood.

But to come to the women.

A man of particular sincerity once said to me that after twenty years of married life he understood his wife no better than on the day he married her. He had of course become familiar with her modes of thought and action which served as knowledge for practical daily purposes. But familiarity had never bred understanding. Her underlying motives, the ultimate significance of her looks and words, remained hidden.

This, I think, is Proust's position, more especially when the woman happens to affect him powerfully. In every case we can *see* his women, and thus far they are the reverse of shadowy. Grandmother, mother, aunts, and servant—the

women that surround his childhood; Mlle. Vinteuil and the Duchesse de Guermantes—female figures that shock or thrill his boyish imagination; Odette—the mature cocotte that stands throughout his youth for feminine mystery and glamour; Odette's daughter Gilberte, and later Albertine—the young girls, minxes both, with whom he falls in love; Madame Verdurin and her circle—the social climbers who call forth his most delicate adult irony as well as his most rancid contempt;—these, simply as pictures, leap out at us complete. Nothing could be more objective than their presentation to the eye and ear of the reader. We feel with each one as if we had met her in the flesh—as one has met a casual acquaintance. The mother's submissive wifeliness; the almost masculine incorruptibility of the grandmother; the raciness of the servant; the neurosis of Aunt Léonie; the half-hearted viciousness of the music-master's daughter; the slightly comic social splendour of the Duchesse; the unmeaning melancholy of Odette's eyes; the unredeemed vulgarity of Madame Verdurin; the domineering girlishness of Gilberte, by turns frank and secretive, appealing and repellent; the smile with which Albertine, at once innocent and wanton, receives the youth in her bedroom—in depicting these Proust never trespasses beyond natural as compared with literary experience. We all know with what liveliness in conversation any man with the gifts of observation and wit can

create an image for us of some female "character" met with in his childhood or his travels. But let that same man come to speak out of his emotions of some woman who has moved him deeply, then his heart will cloud his brain, his tongue will falter or run away with him, and he will no longer be capable of outlining a portrait. As listeners our impressions of his subject will be gained, not from what he says, but independently from what we perceive that he feels, which may well be in direct conflict with his words. In life, that is to say, the more important a character is to us the more we are thrown back for our ultimate knowledge on the emotions aroused by that character in ourselves. In fiction it is usually the other way about. It is his central figures whom the novelist pretends to know best. Proust, however, has recognised this discrepancy with scientific clearness. He devotes himself, therefore, where his important women are concerned—aside from the very minimum of detached, objective observations—to a presentment of the effect they have upon the men that love them.

So his women set us wondering and supposing and coming to our own conclusions exactly as we do in life, either when an individual of our own sex is described for us by one of the other sex, or when we are emotionally affected by some one of the other sex.

For this is important. When it comes to his

male characters, Proust takes a different tone. Here he finds himself able, quite consistently with his philosophy, for far more positive assertion. In various ways he can allow them to reveal and expound themselves, and even each other, as when Bergotte speaks of the married Swann as a man who "has to swallow a hundred serpents every day." The point of view, the intellectual outfit which all males have in common—these give the male novelist a certain tract of solid ground when dealing with characters of his own sex. A man's fellow-feeling for other men is very strong. It has but a faint and imperfect parallel as between woman and woman. Proust, accordingly, without any sacrifice of conscience, can, "by his belief," endow Swann with a soul. But—marvellous and highly characteristic creation as he is—Swann may be put in the same category with other male characters by other male novelists. Odette, Gilberte, Albertine, are in a category by themselves. Outside of Proust's book they are only to be met with in life.

It is in this differential treatment of his women that we perceive how rigorously Proust applies his artistic method. He never seeks to transcend his own personality. In him, the observer, the whole of creation lives and moves and has its being. Men are creatures made in his own image. He can faithfully follow his own emotions, and "by his belief" can conscientiously endow his men with souls. But women are in a

different case. He has no inner guide to assure him that they are anything more than the phantoms they seem. Strictly speaking, this should imply no more than a negative attitude. In fact, however, Proust goes further. Because he has no grounds for belief he passes into unbelief. In his philosophy *esse est percipi*, therefore, the souls of women for him have no existence. Herein it is likely that he has borne out the unavowed experience of most men. Whether or no, he certainly has expressed the truth of his own experience with a purity that few, even among great writers, can rival.

One thing more. There is Proust's mother.

No doubt the avenging eagerness with which I reintroduce her here for my conclusion is due in part to my being myself of the soulless sex. But quite apart from any such feelings, to speak of this novelist's women without reckoning especially with his mother would be inexcusable. That he adored her in childhood he makes manifest. Further, that throughout his life this adoration effectively debarred him from profound emotion where other women were concerned becomes clear enough to the reader. It hardly appears, however, that Proust was himself wholly conscious of this. True, there is a passage in the *Combray* section in which he speaks of " that untroubled peace which no mistress, in later years, has ever been able to give me, since one has doubts of them at the moment when one

believes in them, and never can possess their hearts as I used to receive, in her kiss, the heart of my mother, complete, without scruple or reservation, unburdened by any liability save to myself." But this is the only place where he seems to allow that the love he bore his mother was even comparable in kind with the love aroused by other women later in his life. Indeed, though he repeatedly speaks of the anguish with which in his childhood he longed for his mother's good-night kiss, the ecstasy with which he received it, as if it were the Host in an act of communion, conveying to him "her real presence and with it the power to sleep"; though he tells how, for that "frail and precious kiss," he prepared himself in advance so as to "consecrate" the whole minute of contact; though he dreaded to prolong or repeat the kiss lest a look of displeasure should cross those beautiful features with the slight, beloved blemish under one of the eyes; yet he describes himself at this time as one "into whose life Love had not yet entered," as one whose emotion, failing love and as yet awaiting it, happened to be at the disposal of "filial piety." No wonder if, when temporary "loves" came, he compared with them as unconsciously as unfavourably this good and gracious mother—so admiringly timid as a wife, so gentle towards strangers, so perfect socially, so full of stern solicitude as a parent ("she never allowed herself to go to any length

of tenderness with me") — and found them merely exciting to the senses. He had already, so far as woman was concerned, given his heart away.

Yet, after all, perhaps he knew it well enough and merely takes his own way of saying it. He tells us little enough of his mother, though probably he tells as much as he knows. What her own real thoughts and feelings were we are left to guess. But "never again," he says, after describing one very special visit of hers to the boy's bedroom—"never again will such hours be possible for me. But of late I have been increasingly able to catch, if I listen attentively, the sound of the sobs . . . which broke out only when I found myself alone with Mamma. Actually their echo has never ceased."

CATHERINE CARSWELL.

IX

THE BEST RECORD

ONE of my feelings whenever I read Marcel Proust is regret that Henry James is not alive to enjoy him, as he would have done immensely and amazedly, though, judging from the letters of that great master of the art of writing fiction, no doubt he would not have given him his unqualified approval. But he would have recognised him as working at his own level, while not in his own groove. Yet, for all that Proust is the author of practically only one book, big though that book is, in that one book he has spread his nets wider, and sunk them deeper, than did Henry James in the sum of all his novels. One wonders if such mastery has ever been obtained so suddenly and so completely; indeed, the sureness of touch seems a little less certain in the last published volumes than in the earlier ones. We had revealed to us from the beginning a new way of writing fiction, or rather of describing life. It had never so been done before. Let us pray that he will have no disciples—one can foresee the horror of them; but influence he must have.

My own interest begins with the second volume of *Swann*, though my admiration begins with the first sentence of the first; and my advice to new readers would be to take up any volume

after *Swann*—to start in the middle—when I am sure they will insist on knowing everything the author has to say about his characters from the beginning. You become soaked in the lives of these people as a sponge becomes soaked with water. In the process you live your own life over again, and, if you have lived in Paris and in Normandy, you tread the same ground.

Proust has no " story " to tell. He sets down life as it was lived by certain people at a certain period: Parisian society from the middle of the Dreyfus case to the present day. From the amazing brilliance of the whole opening two details presently detach themselves—the love of Swann for Odette, and the boy and girl idyll in the Champs-Élysées: they are beyond words to praise, for they are not Art, but life recorded with matchless insight or remembrance. We need not compare, but how pale is *Jean Christophe* beside these pages! So when we get to Normandy, the *Plage*, the hotel, and the countryside with its little railway, and childhood has melted into adolescence, we live again those days, and tread those paths, which we thought beyond recapture, save by indistinct memory. It is an exquisite pleasure which I, at any rate, never expected to experience.

Emerging from the shadows of the joyous band of *jeunes filles en fleurs*, with its hint of perversity—we shall have to rewrite our hymns: " There's a *Freud* for little children!"—we

come to the marvellous Guermantes, with whom Proust has pictured that high-born snobbery—and life without snobbery is like meat without salt—which observers, as they get on in years, come to know is inherent in the upper classes no less, perhaps more, than in the middle classes: a right snobbery, bereft of any meanness or noxious prejudices. These people see France through their family history, and their family history was France. They are Ladies and Gentlemen, with all that that connotes: and in considering them we are conscious of all the rest who are not. Proust, in exploring one path, illuminates the others. We spend a few hours in their company, in the course of a dinner and an evening reception (taking up a couple of hundred or so of pages), and at the end we know all about them; we understand the world which made them, and what they are going to make of the world. As contrasts to these great ones we have those other snobs, the Verdurins, of the "cultured" middle class. Surely never before, in memoir, essay, or fiction, has it all been set down so brilliantly.

One wonders what sort of man Proust really was. We know he was a great friend of Léon Daudet—two men, one would have thought, as the poles asunder. We know that he slept by day, and lived and worked by night: we know that he was ill and neurasthenic. We know also that nothing was hidden from him, and that he had an infinite power of expression. He was a

very human being with the brain and the pen of a recording angel.

Occasionally, lest his cleverness should seem to be superhuman, one comes on a jest or an anecdote which is a " chestnut "; or he becomes a little too intricate, or his neurasthenia shows its cloven hoof: once or twice I am inclined to throw the book down as too tiresome, but I cling to him and grapple with him, and soon feel again that I am enjoying one of the greatest pleasures of my life.

One meets with all kinds of people in his work, some of them very odd people; though how very odd is the ordinary normal person! Proust's odd people may be thought to be modern: yet both in art and in life they are indeed very ancient. They are those for whom—to modernise an old phrase—Life is a *mauvais quart d'heure* made up of exquisite complexes. Side by side with these " moderns " are the old-fashioned people, notably the Grandmother and Françoise—not Micawber is more definite than this last.

The more we study the great writers of all ages, and the more we observe for ourselves, the more we realise that the world never alters; we can only ring the changes on the same material. Harmony and discord, beauty and ugliness! It is like a gramophone disc. The records vary, the melodies, the arrangements, make their individual effect, but the substance is the same.

The Masters make their records on an unchanging surface. Marcel Proust's is a magnificent record; perhaps the most brilliant ever achieved. It requires only that we bring to it a sympathetic and sharp-pointed needle.

Did his death leave his record incomplete?

One would like to know what more he had in his mind to record of these people. Especially is one curious as to the future of M. de Charlus. What did he do in the Great War? Did he open one of his houses as a hospital for not too badly wounded soldiers? Or was he content with lending his name to charity bazaars? Or was he —likeliest of all—galvanised by his high breeding and undoubted courage into a vigour beyond his years, to make a hero's end? Perhaps we shall never know. Does it much matter? We can finish off these people to our own liking, or—if indeed his book was unfinished—leave them as he left them. There they are for us, all alive—and likely to remain so.

REGINALD TURNER.

X

A FOOT-NOTE

THOUGH in England almost every one, who has read and understood, admires the works of Marcel Proust, it is not so in France. There, not to go beyond my own experience, I have met plenty of writers, and good ones too, who cannot away with them. Even that essay on the style of Flaubert, which I had supposed would be universally reckoned a masterpiece, I have heard described by a friend of mine, a charming poet and admired dramatist, as childish. Now, when I hear such a one, and others whom I respect, disparaging Proust, I do not fly into a passion; I seek the cause, instead. And I find it—though the discovery, should they ever come to hear of it, would a good deal shock some of my French friends and surprise perhaps a few of my English—in Politics.

The French themselves seem hardly to realise how sharp and deep their political divisions are become. Yet when we remember that during the last forty years politics have been able to make of that gentle latin scepticism, which gave us Montaigne, Bayle, and Voltaire, and still gives us M. Anatole France, something as narrow and bitter almost as Calvinism; when we hear of such pretty place-names as (say) St. Symphorien being changed into (say) Émile Combesville; we ought

not to be surprised if literature even gets splashed a little in the dirty dog-fight. Because Marcel Proust is supposed to have chosen as the subject of his epic the *faubourg St. Germain*, it is assumed that he admired and believed in it. Was not *L'Action française* amongst the first to hail his rising genius? Is he not half a Jew and therefore wholly a renegade? He is a black reactionary and an enemy of light. He is not a good man, so how can he be a good writer? We are back again in a very familiar world of criticism; only the English critics can prove that he was good, after all.

As a matter of fact, which I know counts for little in politics or criticism, Proust seems to me often unduly hard on the *faubourg*. I shall not easily forget, nor perhaps will it, the devastating effect of that small phrase, when, after treating us to a ravishing description of a theatre full to the brim of *beau monde*, after explaining how these are the people fitted by training, tradition, and circumstance to taste the things of the mind, he adds, by way of afterthought as it were, "si seulement ils avaient eu de l'esprit." For my part, sitting next her at that gorgeous dinner-party, I was completely bowled over by the matchless Oriane, Duchesse de Guermantes (late Princesse des Laumes), bowled over not only by her beauty and seduction, and a little perhaps by her great name, but by her *bel esprit* and intelligence. To me her observations on Victor

Hugo in particular and the art of writing in general seemed to possess that airy profundity which above all things one relishes in a literary conversation, until M. Proust, after pooh-poohing her circle, undid the duchess herself with this painfully just appreciation: "Pour toutes ces raisons les causeries avec la duchesse ressemblaient à ces connaissances qu'on puise dans une bibliothèque de château, surannée, incomplète, incapable de former une intelligence, dépourvue de presque tout ce que nous aimons, mais nous offrant parfois quelque renseignement curieux, voire la citation d'une belle page que nous ne connaissions pas, et dont nous sommes heureux dans la suite de nous rappeler que nous en devons la connaissance à une magnifique demeure seigneuriale. Nous sommes alors, pour avoir trouvé la préface de Balzac à *la Chartreuse* ou des lettres inédites de Joubert, tentés de nous exagérer le prix de la vie que nous y avons menée et dont nous oublions, pour cette aubaine d'un soir, la frivolité stérile."

By naming Madame de Guermantes I have given myself occasion to remark one of M. Proust's most extraordinary gifts—his power of realising a character. Without being presented one would know the incomparable duchess should one ever have the happiness of meeting her at a party; and I should recognise one of her good things ("Oriane's latest") were it repeated in the train. When some one quotes a saying by Dr. Johnson or the Duke of Wellington we need not

verify by the book; their characters are so vivid to us, and they speak so much in character, that their phrases have the ring of familiar voices. It is the same with Madame de Guermantes. How many authors have achieved this miracle? Shakespeare, of course, who achieved all miracles, can distinguish even his minor characters. In a tipsy dialogue between Mrs. Quickly and Doll Tearsheet you can tell by the mere phrasing, by the particular way in which a bawdy joke is turned, which of the ladies is speaking. And who else can do it? Not Balzac, I am sure. Dickens, some one will say. Yes, but only by giving us for characters blatant caricatures. We all know the devil by his tail.

So far I have not contested the common opinion that Proust is the poet of the *beau monde*; I have sought only to show that, if he were, it would not follow that he was either a snob or a reactionary: it would not follow that he was taken in. In fact, the subject of Proust's epic is the whole of French life as it was from forty to twenty years ago—a subject of which the *faubourg* is but a part. He gives us a full-length picture of family life in the provinces and of a quasi-intellectual circle in Paris, of the "seaside girls" who run about with Albertine, and a *croquis* of "county society"; best of all, perhaps, he gives us exquisite landscapes and still-lifes. And surely at this time of day it ought not to be necessary to remind people, especially French people, that any

subject, provided the artist is thoroughly possessed by it, is as good as any other; that the forms and colours, and their relations, of a pot of flowers or fruit on a table, passionately apprehended, are capable of inspiring as sublime a work of art as the Madonna or the Crucifixion. If the *faubourg* above all things fascinated Proust, that I suspect was because in it Proust saw a subject proper only to the touch of a master psychologist. "Society," he saw, is a hierarchy without official grades or badges: unlike the army, with its colonels, majors, and captains; unlike the navy, with its admirals, captains, and commanders; it resembles rather a public school or small college. It is a microcosm in which people are moved up and down, in and out, by mysterious and insensible powers; in which they are promoted and degraded by a breath of fashion blowing they know not whence; in which they obey slavishly unwritten laws, as absolute as those of the Medes and Persians: powers these, none of which they themselves can apprehend, but of which some can be surprised by sensibilities in their way as delicate and subtle as those which know when a lady changes her *sachets* and can distinguish the *bouquet* of Léoville from Larose. Herein perhaps, rather than in its social prestige, lay the charm of the *faubourg* for Marcel Proust.

One word more: a translation may do very well, but we can have no English Proust. No Englishman, I mean, writing in English, would

be allowed to publish in England so complete a picture of life. Wherefore as a novel- and play-writing nation we have lost pride of place, and cannot hope to regain it till we have set our laws in order. An artist must be possessed by his subject; but the English novelist who is inspired by his sense of contemporary life is not allowed to express that by which he is possessed. Fielding, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Dickens, Meredith, James, and Hardy, English novelists who took contemporary life for their province, all had something to say which may have shocked or hurt but which the age did not prohibit. They were, therefore, as free to express the best that was in them as Balzac, Zola, or Proust. But to-day our subtlest and most active minds, affected maybe, consciously or unconsciously, by modern psychological discoveries, are concerned, so far as they are concerned with life at all, with certain aspects of it, with certain relations, of which they may not treat freely. Their situation is as painful and absurd as would have been that of men of science who, towards the close of last century, should have been allowed to make no use of Darwin's contribution to biology. The gap between first- and third-rate minds has been growing alarmingly wide of late. Proust moves in a world unknown almost to the intellectual slums, or to those intellectual lower middle classes from which are drawn too many of our magistrates, judges, and legislators. These lag behind, and

impose their veto on the sincere treatment of English manners by a first-rate English artist. And perhaps the best tribute which English admirers of Proust could pay his memory would be to agitate for the repeal of those absurd and barbarous laws which make an English *Recherche du Temps Perdu* impossible.

CLIVE BELL.

XI

THE SPELL OF PROUST

THE magic ring which Marcel Proust drew, almost literally, round his readers—since it is in the circle of "*le temps perdu*" which is to become "*le temps retrouvé*" that he sets us and himself—seemed early in the incantation to betray a break whereby we might escape, did we so wish, from his compulsion. For, enthralled as we had been by *Swann*, there was a sensible relaxing of the spell with the *Jeunes Filles*. Not in the opening pages, where the atmosphere that we had rapturously learned to breathe was potent still with its intoxicating magic; but when we came to Balbec, and the group of seaside girls began to show as rulers of the scene, there was scarce one of us who did not own to disappointment. *La petite bande*, more actual and, on the surface, more alluring than *la petite phrase* in the sonata of Vinteuil, yet wholly failed to charm the sense or the imagination as the enigmatic little group of notes had charmed. We heard, and we responded to, the cry: "Those flappers are so tedious!"—and as Albertine grew more and more significant, *we* grew more sceptical, and told ourselves that we could step outside the ring at any moment we might choose. But somehow, that emancipative moment never came. Despite the blinding print of the edition in a single volume

—print that must have permanently injured our collective sight—there always was a reason why we could not break away. And finally, we realised that we were wrong, and that the spell had but become more absolute, in both the shades of meaning in that word. For now that some of the more normal baits for interest were laid aside, we could perceive that here was sorcery in its pure state—the thing itself, stripped of all seeming. Now we could not so easily, or easily at all, "say why" when the profane inquired of us what the magic was—why, reading Proust, we were so interested. We were *not* so interested; we could scarcely say, or even think, that we were "interested" any more.

The miracle had happened. We were spell-bound, for good and all, within the magic ring. We had forgotten what we used to mean when, in the world outside, we had said "dull"; for here was much that was not merely dull but positively soporific, yet our eyes were glued upon the baleful page, and any interruption seemed a challenge to the occult power that held us. Something was risked, immeasurably worth our while, did we fall short of the required submission. . . . This was because we now could feel more deeply the extent of what the wizard meant to do with us. We were not passively to stand within the circle. We were, with him, to pace it mystically round, while time ran back to fetch the Age of Gold. *Le temps passé* would be

transmuted, imperceptibly, into *le temps retrouvé*; and our aid was necessary to the necromancer's full success. With this flattering divination there began a new excitement, different in action from the old; for soon, instead of rushing at the latest Marcel Proust directly we had bought it, we indeed did buy it, but re-read the earlier volumes first. Here was the very magic ring itself, drawn round our fireside chair! The latest Proust lay ready to our hand, slim or substantial token of the power still unspent; but lest we should have missed a single letter in the charm, we spelt it through devoutly once again; and, in the spelling, found how many an indication subtly skilled at once to warn and to escape us till the moment of reflection or re-reading! And as a consequence, we now perceived so intricate and exquisite a "pattern in the carpet" as could make the newest volume into something more exciting for anticipation even than we had dreamed.

This is the proof, to me, of Marcel Proust's (as one might think, indisputable; yet by a few disputed) genius. The *Swann* book contains the largest share of interest, no doubt—that merer, franker kind of interest which other books can give us in a hardly less degree. But in the later volumes, as they "grow on" us, there is far more (if also there is less) than this; and it is through the more that we come finally to clear perception of Proust's purpose and his mastery. For in these less immediately attractive volumes

we are conscious of an ever-growing sense of the significance so deeply interfused through the whole work. He had by then become absorbed to such degree in his interpretation of the microcosm which he saw as a sufficing symbol of the irony, absurdity, and the incessant alternation, "intermittency," and travail of the consciousness of man, that we are sensible, as he proceeds, of powers more transcendent than the highest of the writer's mere accomplishment—stupendous as that is in Proust, who could "write" anything he chose, and chose to write so many things, from satire that is blighting in its smiling subtlety (so muted as to mock the hasty ear!), to lyric flower-pieces like the paradisal hawthorn-hedge in *Swann*, and the unrivalled comments upon buildings, pictures, fashions in dress and manners (who will forget the monocles at the big evening-party at Mme. de Saint-Euverte's?), books, the drama, even photographs! In the great elegiac glories of the death of Bergotte (not yet published in book-form), and of that *grand'mère* who is the *motif*, as it were, in the symphonic composition of the unnamed central figure's personality, Proust sounded chords which lay till then beyond the compass of his readers' hearing, but were then revealed to sense that shall not lose them while it yet survives.

But over all this virtuosity there rules a mightier gift—the master-gift of insight. Proust, one could say, "knows everything," in the

restricted meaning of the words. No bent, no twist, of modern thought escapes him; yet, as one reader writes to me, "there is no dead psychology"—no case stretched on a Procrustean bed, with all that does not fit lopped comfortably, and discomfortingly, off. He, unlike Nature, is most careful of the single life. If ever we had questioned that—and we had very little questioned it—the Charlus portrait answered us: that masterpiece of the undaunted, following eye and mind. Proust leads us with him on this journey of the visual and mental powers; we are no more involuntarily drawn on than he has been into the state of an astounded fondness and appreciation for the maudlin, overbearing, ludicrous, yet constantly pathetic or superb old "invert." We are offended personally by the insolences of his favourites; the tears in his unholy eyes can well-nigh wet our own . . . and this though, with the master's hand upon our shoulders, we have gone through every phase of the degrading intimacies, seen and heard the tragi-comic outbursts of the princely victim, every now and then remembering his "rank" and seeking to restore the true relation between him and those whom in his view he honours by his merest word, yet who are his disdainful masters through his helpless depravation.

If there were nothing else than Charlus in the books, Proust must be given pride of place among the masters. But with the plenitude

there is—what must we give? More than a master, one would say, a writer cannot be. Yet in the image here suggested of the magic circle, there is possibly the one thing more that causes Proustians to divide their reading lives into the time before and after they have read these books. No spell had yet been worked on us of potency like this; for though we are pent within the ring, we move within it too—the world revolves, for us, as in a crystal held beneath our gaze by one who, moving with us, will reveal the secret hidden not there only but in our own dim sense, when at the last *le temps perdu* shall have become *le temps retrouvé*.

ETHEL COLBURN MAYNE.

XII

A NEW PSYCHOMETRY[1]

TO judge from the newspapers, there have been tremendous "crises" in public affairs during the last few days: the triumph of Fascismo in Italy, the Lausanne Conference, the English elections. But to many of us the great events are merely spectacular; they pass rapidly across the screen, while the band plays irrelevant scraps of syncopated music, and seem no more real than any other of the adventures, avowedly fictitious, that are "filmed" for our idle hours. They don't, save on reflection and much diligent pondering of leading articles, come home to our business and bosoms. But one announcement in *The Times* of last Monday week shocked many of us with a sudden, absurdly indignant bewilderment, like a foul blow: I mean the death of Marcel Proust. It is not only absurd but impious to be indignant with the decrees of Fate. The wise throughout the ages have prescribed for us our proper behaviour in the face of such an event; and most of us find the prescription quite useless. But, on the death of an author, there is this peculiar consolation that never fails: his work lives absolutely unaffected by his death.

[1] Reprinted from *The Times* of Wednesday, November 29, 1922. *The Times* had been almost alone among English newspapers in giving "publicity" to the death of Marcel Proust in its issue of Monday, November 20.—C. K. S. M.

. . . We can light the lamp, make a clear fire, and sit down to the book with the old thrill. There is only the thought that we must be content with what we have, that we are to get no more from that hand. With Marcel Proust, however, it seems that we are spared even that mortification. He has left behind him the completion of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. This is great news. The announcements from the press of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* will be eagerly awaited. Even a new Anatole France is not so important an event.

It has been said that Proust will go down to posterity as the author of one book. This is only true in a literal sense. For the many volumes of *A la Recherche* that already crowd the shelves are several "books" in one. It is not a "story," but a panorama of many stories. Indeed, who reads Proust for the "story"? His book is really a picture of the modern world and the modern spirit, and that is its peculiar fascination for us. There are "morbid" elements in it, to be sure—you cannot read a page without seeing that it must have been written by some one who was anything but a normal, healthy human being, and it is not for nothing that *The Times*[1] has compared him to Petronius Arbiter. But one of the advantages of this hyperaesthesia is a heightened sensibility for

[1] *The Times*, Monday, November 20, 1922: "Marcel Proust: An Appreciation." (From a Correspondent.)—C. K. S. M.

everything, the perception and accurate notation of innumerable details in thought and feeling that escape a normal observer.

Take, for instance, the account of the famous author "Bergotte." Proust, little more than a child, but already his ardent reader, meets him at luncheon. And, first, the boy's imagined author, a "langoureux vieillard," has to give place to the reality, much younger, a little man with a chin-tuft and a nose like a snail-shell. Then comes an elaborate description of his spoken diction, pronunciation, etc., and an attempt to reconcile these with the peculiarities of his written style. Special "notes":

> Doubtless, again, so as to distinguish himself from the previous generation, too fond as it had been of abstractions, of weighty commonplaces, when Bergotte wished to speak favourably of a book, what he would bring into prominence, what he would quote with approval, would always be some scene that furnished the reader with an image, some picture that had no rational significance. "Ah, yes!" he would exclaim, "it is quite admirable! There is a little girl in an orange shawl. It is excellent!" Or again, "Oh, yes, there is a passage in which there is a regiment marching along the street; yes, it is excellent!" As for style, he was not altogether of his time (though he remained quite exclusively of his race, abominating Tolstoy, George Eliot, Ibsen, and Dostoevsky), for the word that always came to his lips when he wished to praise the style of any writer was "mild." "Yes, you know, I like Chateaubriand better in *Atala* than in *René*; he

> seems to me to be milder." He said the word like a doctor who, when his patient assures him that milk will give him indigestion, answers: "But, you know, it's very mild." And it is true that there was in Bergotte's style a kind of harmony similar to that for which the ancients used to praise certain of their orators in terms which we now find it hard to understand, accustomed as we are to our own modern tongues, in which effects of that kind are not sought.[1]

It is, further, explained how this man of genius came to pay court to his intellectual inferiors with an eye on the Academy, and how, while his own private morals were bad, the moral tone of his books was of the loftiest.

> Perhaps it is only in really vicious lives that the moral problem can arise in all its disquieting strength. And of this problem the artist finds a solution in the terms not of his own personal life but of what is for him the true life, a general, a literary solution. As the great Doctors of the Church began often, without losing their virtue, by acquainting themselves with the sins of all mankind, out of which they extracted their own personal sanctity, so great artists often, while being thoroughly wicked, make use of their vices in order to arrive at a conception of the moral law that is binding upon us all.[1]

[1] I am glad that the acknowledgement here of Mr. Walkley's courtesy in allowing me to substitute my version for his of these two passages from *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* gives me an opportunity to acknowledge also my borrowing and to congratulate him upon the discovery of the word "mild"—"une véritable trouvaille," as Norpois would undoubtedly have called it.—C. K. S. M.

Nor is the portrait finished yet. Bergotte was at bottom a man who really loved only certain images and to compose and paint them in words. Had he had to defend himself before a tribunal, in spite of himself he would have chosen his words, not for their effect on the judge, but in view of images which the judge would certainly never have perceived.

It is this extraordinarily minute "psychometry" that is the peculiar mark of Proust's work. The sensations Swann derives from a sonata of Vinteuil's, the special quality of Elstir's pictures of the sea-shore, the effect of afternoon light in the church at Combray, glimpses of military life at Doncières, with its contrast of the First Empire aristocracy and the *ancien régime*,—it is the first time that such things as these have been put into words and brought intimately home to you. Then there are the studies of *le grand monde*—the "gilded saloons," as Disraeli would have called them, of the Guermantes and the rest. Here you have a picture of the Faubourg Saint-Germain that is as true, you are assured, as Balzac's was false.[1]

[1] In his article, published in *The Times* three weeks later, on December 20, 1922, Mr. Walkley replied to a criticism of this statement:—"The old complaint of 'misrepresenting' modern France is now beginning to be heard about the great novelist just dead, Marcel Proust. An eminent English novelist tackles me about this. He says Proust is not entitled to the highest rank in literature because his representation of French society is partial only, and therefore unfair; that he writes only of the Faubourg Saint-Germain set, which stands for the 'dead' France, and not of the 'live' people, soldiers and statesmen and others, who have made and are making France to-day. And he contrasts him with Balzac, who aimed at

I confess "ma mère" and "ma grand'mère" bore me. And there is just a little too much of "le petit clan." But in this vast banquet of modern life and thought and sensation there is plenty of room to pick and choose. Since Henry Bernstein first mentioned Proust's name to me in the year before the war I have returned again and again for a tit-bit to that feast. Proust is dead; but we can still go on enjoying his work. In that sense the cry of the child in Maeterlinck's *Oiseau Bleu* is true enough: "There is no death."

A. B. WALKLEY.

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giving a panorama of the whole social scheme. Well, it strikes me as an unfortunate comparison. Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* was like Zola's *Rougon-Macquart Family*, a mere afterthought, a specious formula designed to suggest continuity and completeness in what was merely casual and temperamental. As a 'representation of France' it is not to be taken seriously; what it represents—like any other work of art—is its author's genius. His men of action, his statesmen, his men of affairs, are, frankly, preposterous. Proust never set out to 'represent' France; he represented the side of its social life that happened to interest him. What he did magnificently represent was the hitherto unexplored in human nature and the human mind. As M. Jacques Rivière says of him in the current *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 'The discoveries he has made in the human mind and heart will one day be considered as capital, and of the same rank as those of Kepler in astronomy, Claude Bernard in physiology, or Auguste Comte in the interpretation of the sciences.' That strikes me as better work than producing a portrait-group of 'Modern France,' with General Lyautey arm-in-arm with Marshal Foch, and M. Clemenceau putting on his celebrated pearl-grey gloves."—C. K. S. M.

XIII

PROUST AND THE MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS[1]

FOR Englishmen Marcel Proust has already become one of the great figures of modern literature. The feeling is common to many of his readers that in some way his work marks an epoch. What kind of epoch it is harder to say. Is he an end, or a beginning? And, again, yet another question insinuates itself continually as we pass slowly through his long volumes. What precisely—if answers to such questions can be made precise—was his own intention as a writer? Not that it necessarily makes the least difference to his own importance whether he succeeded or failed, whether he was consistent or spasmodic in following out his own plan. But we, at least, should be the happier for some indication of the thread to follow. For there comes a time in the reading of a long novel—and *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is surely one of the longest—when we feel the need to stand aside, to contemplate it as a whole, to grasp the

[1] Reprinted from *The Times Literary Supplement* of Thursday, January 4, 1923, where this article followed an English version of a formal tribute to Marcel Proust, signed by nineteen English men and women, which appeared (in French) in the special number of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* for January 1923. Mr. Middleton Murry had already written, at greater length (too great, indeed, for reproduction in this volume), on Marcel Proust in *The Quarterly Review* for July 1922.—C. K. S. M.

pattern, to comprehend the general vision of life on which its essential individuality depends. Only thus, it seems, can we really make it our own.

In this respect Marcel Proust's book may be fairly said to bristle with difficulties. Its obvious theme, its surface intention, as we perceive it in the brilliant opening pages of *Du côté de chez Swann*, is the presentation by an adult man of his memories of childhood. We feel, though with peculiar qualifications to which we must return, that we are on the threshold of a spiritual autobiography; we are to be the enchanted witnesses of the unfolding and growth of a strangely sensitive consciousness. But no sooner are we attuned to the subtleties of this investigation and have accustomed ourselves to Proust's breathless, tiptoe following of the faint and evanescent threads of association: no sooner have we begun to take a deep and steady breath of the rich fragrance of Aunt Léonie's house at Combray, and to imbibe the luxurious atmosphere of the old town, whose shifting colours are as opulent as the lights of the windows in the church round which it clings: no sooner have we prepared ourselves to watch with absorbed interest the process of growth of a mind nurtured in this almost intoxicating soil,—than the thread is abruptly snapped. We do not complain at the moment, for the episode *Amour de Swann* is the highest sustained achievement of Proust as a prose-writer. Perhaps the devouring passion of love—

"Venus toute entière à sa proie attachée"—the smouldering, torturing flame of unsatisfied passion which by the law of its own nature can never be satisfied, has never been so subtly and so steadily anatomised before. Perhaps it has been more wonderfully presented, but never more wonderfully analysed.

It is not surprising that in the fascination of this intolerable and unwonted history, in which every psychological subtlety of the author is properly and beautifully dominated by the tragic theme, we forget that this is not at all the thing we went out to see. The boy whose history we have been following could not have known of Swann's discomfiture before he was a man. It has happened, indeed, before the narrative of *Du Côté de chez Swann* opens, before the bell of the garden-gate tinkles and Swann takes his place with the family on the verandah; but it can have no place in the story of the boy's development until he is old enough to understand it. In other words, the angle of presentation has abruptly changed. Into a narrative concerned, as we imagine, solely with what a boy knew and felt, and how he knew and felt it, is suddenly thrust an episode of which he could have known nothing at all.

These two sections of the book—composing the yellow-backed *Du Côté de chez Swann* with which Proust's admirers had so long to remain content—were at once baffling and fascinating.

Moreover, they do actually contain Proust's very finest work: he was never again to sustain himself on this level for so long. But, considered in themselves (and there were three or four years in which we had no choice but to consider them so), they could be made to yield a pattern. On the one side was the vague and heroic figure of Swann as he loomed on the extreme horizon of the boy's world, the mysterious visitant whose appearances in the household made an agony of his solitary going to bed; on the other was the Swann of reality, the reserved, silent, ineffably refined darling of the *beau monde*, who held his teeth clenched, like the Spartan, while the fox gnawed at his vitals. The contrast, the building up of the character of Swann, as it were, from two sides at once, was the quite sufficient motive of the book. But, so understood, it was Swann's book, not the boy's.

But the next volumes brought us back to the boy's history. As we read of his love affair with Albertine, his adoration of the Duchesse de Guermantes, his adventures in the rarefied atmosphere of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, it became more and more evident that *Amour de Swann* was, in spite of its beauty and power, only an irrelevant interlude, after all. And in the narrative of the boy's stay in the hotel at Balbec came frequent hints that the key to the story as a whole might be found in the earlier emphasis upon the manner in which the author went in search

of the past. At the beginning of *Du Côté de chez Swann* he had been at pains to give us not merely his results but his method also. He was a grown man, suddenly waking from sleep, trying to locate himself once more in his room, and his room in the world; and something familiar in this strange sensation had reminded him of his sensations in his bedroom as a child. But "reminded" is altogether too coarse and summary a word for the delicate process on which his researches depended; rather it is that a familiarity in the strange sensation whispers to him that it holds a secret for him if he will only explore it. It conceals something that he must know. Again, it is the vague familiarity of the faint flavour of a *madeleine* dipped in tea, which the grown man is eating in his mother's company, which ultimately yields up the magnificently vivid picture of Combray and Aunt Léonie. These sensations, or presentiments of the past, come to the boy also. There is, for example, the beautiful account of his mysterious excitement at a sight of the spire and towers of Martinville church when he is driving home in Dr. Percepied's carriage. Again he has the sense of memories he cannot grasp, of a secret and mystical message that he cannot make his own; it is the occasion of his first attempt at writing.[1] These premonitions become

[1] In another and rather complicated sense this is a presentiment of the future. The spires appear to have been those of Caen, the carriage a motor car, the year evidently much later. The original article will be found in *Pastiches et Mélanges*, on pp. 91 to 99.—C. K. S. M.

more frequent during his stay with his grandmother at the Balbec hotel. Then the sudden sight of a tiny clump of trees seen while he is driving with the Marquise de Villeparisis makes him feel that they are stretching out imploring arms towards him in a mute appeal. If he can divine what they have to tell him (they seem to say) he will touch the secret of "la vraie vie," of life indeed. And then the writer warns us that the story of his search to make this secret his own is to come, and that this premonition of a task to be accomplished was to haunt him throughout his life.

At this moment Marcel Proust came nearest, we may believe, to revealing to the reader the hidden soul of his own book. There is room for different interpretations, of course, and it is admitted that in any case he was frequently distracted from whatever plan he had by his delight in a pure description of the human comedy from the angle most familiar to him. Nevertheless, we are persuaded that Proust brought to the exact and intimate analysis of his own sensations something more than the self-consciousness of talent—some element, let us say, of an almost religious fervour. This modern of the moderns, this *raffiné* of *raffinés*, had a mystical strain in his composition. These hidden messages of a moment, these glimpses and intuitions of "la vraie vie" behind a veil, were of the utmost importance to him; he had some kind of im-

mediate certainty of their validity. He confessed as much, and we are entitled to take a man so reticent at his word.

We may take him at his word also when he acknowledges that the effort to penetrate behind the veil of these momentary perceptions was the chief interest of his life. The first of these illuminations—the vision of Martinville spire—had taken shape in a piece of writing which he gives us. We suspect that the last did also, and that its visible expression is the whole series of volumes which, after all, do bear a significant title—*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*; we suspect that the last page of the last volume would have brought us to the first page of the first, and that the long and winding narrative would finally have revealed itself as the history of its own conception. Then, we may imagine, all the long accounts of the Guermantes' parties and the extraordinary figure of M. de Charlus would have fallen into their places in the scheme, as part of the surrounding circumstances whose pressure drove the youth and the man into the necessity of discovering a reality within himself. What he was to discover, when the demand that he should surrender himself to his moments of vision became urgent and finally irresistible, was the history of what he was. Proust—and amid the most labyrinthine of his complacent divagations into the *beau monde* a vague sense of this attends us—was much more than a sentimental

autobiographer of genius; he was a man trying to maintain his soul alive. And thus, it may be, we have an explanation of the rather surprising fact that he began his work so late. The two volumes which went before *Du Côté de chez Swann* [1] were not indeed negligible, but they were the work of a dilettante. The explanation, we believe, is that in spite of his great gifts Proust was a writer *malgré lui*; he composed against the grain. We mean that had it been only for the sake of the satisfaction of literary creation, he probably would not have written at all. It was only when writing presented itself to him as the only available means for getting down to the bedrock of his own personality, as the only instrument by which his *fin-de-siècle* soul—the epithet is, in his case, a true definition—could probe to something solid to live by, that he seriously took up the pen. It was the lance with which he rode after the Grail—" la vraie vie."

Proust at the first glance looks wholly different from a man who rides off on a desperate adventure. There seems to be no room for desperate adventures in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. It is hardly congruous to some senses to ride through the waste land in a sixty horse-power limousine.

[1] *I.e.*, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, published in 1896, and *Pastiches et Mélanges*, which, strictly speaking, did not come as a volume until after *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, in the spring of 1919. But of the *Pastiches* some at least had appeared in the *Figaro* in 1908 and 1909, while the *Mélanges* date even further, and include the introductions to Proust's translations of Ruskin, *La Bible d'Amiens* (1904) and *Sésame et les Lys* (1906).—C. K. S. M.

Nevertheless, it can be done. The outward and visible sign is, not for the first time, different from the inward and spiritual grace.

So by a devious path we return to our first question. Proust marks an epoch. What kind of epoch? Is it an end or a beginning? And the answer we have reached is the answer we might have expected in the case of a figure so obviously considerable. Proust is both an end and a beginning. More an end than a beginning, perhaps, if we have regard to the technique and texture of his work. In the art of literature itself he opens up no new way. And, in the deeper sense, he indicates a need more than he satisfies it. The modern mind, looking into the astonishing mirror which Proust holds up to it, will not see in it the gleam of something to live by; but it will see, if it knows how to look, an acknowledgement of that necessity and a burning desire to satisfy it. By so much Marcel Proust marks a beginning also. It is the flame of this desire which smoulders always through his book, and at times breaks out; it is this which makes it his own, and this which gives it, in the true sense, style.

J. MIDDLETON MURRY.

XIV

PROUST'S WAY

I WENT Proust's way for the first time one rainy winter evening five years ago, waiting in her warm boudoir for a foolish Society woman to come in and give me tea and an introduction to the new popular novelist. But she had not come in, and on a table near me, by the powder-puff and the cigarettes, I found an author who had not yet swept the board as he has since done.

A re-bound copy of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, from that accredited emporium which Thomas Carlyle founded for the reading of the Intelligentzia, the London Library, lay, dull and forbidding, among the brocade and tinsel of the bibelots. Surprised, I opened it, intending, as one idly may during these interludes, to take good-humoured cognisance of the nature of another's chosen study. At once I became involved in an *enchevêtrement*, a leash of moods, a congeries of complexes, of crankinesses, all that goes to make up a man—Swann. There was no breathlessness, no sense of hurry, yet it was "good going." There were hairbreadth but quite actual escapes from bathos, ugly grazings averted, artistic difficulties compounded: this author backed his sentences in and out of garages like a first-class motorist. . . .

And, suddenly, the rumble of an earthly car sounded and my hostess and the popular author came in and tea was a weariness, for Tante Léonie—we all have our Tantes Léonie—had entered into my knowledge, and the Lady of the Cattleyas was just beginning to cause Swann, whom I already loved, to suffer after the way of all men who want anything very badly. We never mentioned the shabby, black book I had put down, but began to discuss, in this Kensington drawing-room, Freud, much as people discussed music in the drawing-room of Mme. Verdurin in Paris, and in very much the same style as if Madame Odette de Crécy had taken a hand, and Swann, blinded by love, had listened to her.

But I—I had become acquainted with Proust and had gained a world—one of the worlds in which, through a book, we can go to live awhile whenever we choose.

Proust! What is Proust? This is the cry of the Carping Uninitiated among us. To such persons, constitutionally unwilling to be instructed, one replies that Proust is a fashion—a disease—and that a Proustian, so-called, is an Opium-Eater. But, to those who know him and love him, he is a wise and cunning Prospero whose wand is style, and Combray an enchanted island—Ferdinand, not much Miranda, but Caliban, drunken sailors and all.

The Opium Trance, indeed, offers some

parallel. Dr. Hochst tells us that the wily subconsciousness, at odds with its earthly environment, is able to invoke and maintain an attitude of benign stupor towards the universe, holding it, as it were, at arm's length, able to subsist in tranquil abstraction from chill and hateful circumstance. And one can easily imagine some triply disillusioned soul, rebuffed of love and ambition and the fount of life itself, entering on a course of the Master, content to live, lullabyed by the slight movement as of flickering woodland leaves, warmed by the soft light that falls on grey cathedral walls and white, dusty roads, quietly appreciative of the Master's passionless, infallible display of the complications and unconscious betrayals of their ego by Françoise and Tante Léonie, Odette and the Duchess; intrigued by his fine sense of social values shown by the apt posing of the social Inferiorities of the Verdurin *ménage* in Paris against the ineffable Aristocracies ensconced in their old château, Guermantes Way—and so on, through terms of months or even years, till the stupor, benign in character, ends at last in the ordinary manner, the patient dying, still *en plein Proust*, with, perhaps, a volume or two unread, to the good, for there are, or are to be, a good many.

The normal, healthy person, still active, still complying with life, finds it more than soothing to commit himself to this peaceable, effluent mind-flow, a current of thought that has, like life, its

eddies, its *transes*, but persists, as must we all who agree with our destinies, in its appointed borders and so gains something of the peace of resignation that Renan speaks of: "*Il n'y a rien de suave comme le renoncement de la joie, rien de doux comme l'enchantement du désenchantement.*" For there is, indeed, no joy in all these myriad pages: how could there be, since joy is clear-cut and impermanent and all Proustian values fade and are merged in each other without such a thing as an edge anywhere! The sharp, dramatic point popular novelists excel in would break the spell.

We surrender ourselves to these entrancing *longueurs*; to indescribable sensations that endure. Reading in Proust is, to me, like the long drink of a child whom, by and by, a solicitous elder bids put the cup down . . . a gesture that this Master will never make. It is a suave, sensuous pleasure, like stroking the long, rippling beard of Ogier the Dane as he sits, stone-like, in his enchanted castle. It is a patient, monkish task like that of tending with loving, religious husbandry the Holy Rose at Hildesheim, that has gone on growing for four hundred years. It suggests a sense of going on, a promise of a future that may not be so very different, such as we got when our German nurse told us that Grimm's tale of the man who fell in and was drowned, but, presently, found himself under the still waters of the mere, walking, *langweilig*, in

meadows prankt with daisies and buttercups and fat flocks grazing. . . .

Proust translated Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*—just the unexpected sort of thing he would do—and one might theorise and hint that his learned appreciation of the beauties that lie within due submission to architectural rules, and acceptance of the limitations and possibilities of shaped stones, have helped to form the backbone of his style. It has the precision and poise of the arch, supported by the virility and integrity of the pillar, with the permitted *fioriture* of the pinnacle sparingly used, as one sees it in the Norman churches dotted all round about Combray and Balbec. And I am sure his style is the magician's wand without whose composed and certain wielding we should never have allowed him to lead us, like willing children, through the mazes, winding, twisting, but always planned and in order, of his mind—or Swann's. And if Swann—remote, withdrawn, half-unsympathetic character that he is—had not been so essentially lovable and had not, while telling us all, succeeded in being at the same time suggestive, we should not have yielded ourselves so utterly to *his* mind-flow.

Proust made Swann a financier, a Jew, and gave him a German name, because, I think, he wished to indicate to our subconscious judgments a cause of Swann's curious racial patience, his waiting on and deference to the caprice of others. He allows life "to ride" him, Mme. Verdurin

to patronise him, Odette to make him love her: just as the trees let the winds lash their boughs and break them, as rivers, flattened and contradicted by raindrops, flow on all the same under a grey sky. Swann, beautifully groomed as he is, apt for drawing-rooms, and acquainted with dukes and ashamed to say so, is a piece of Nature —Nature whom I always see as an old man working in a field, with a sack over his shoulders, bowed to the elements. For Swann doesn't act; things happen to him. Even his deep and pertinacious affection is discounted by the inferior object of it. He is the golden mean in man, no more a crank than we would all be if we were rich, with weaknesses that we could, if we would, translate into heroisms. Most cultivated women infallibly must have loved Swann—he is probably, therefore, of the kind that finds only the Odettes of the world to its liking.

VIOLET HUNT.

XV

M. VINTEUIL'S SONATA

IT has never been published, never, so far as I can ascertain, been performed in any of our concert-halls. Indeed, its largest audience must have been the fashionable one which gathered for the *soirée musicale* given by the Marquise de Saint-Euverte, when Mme. de Cambremer's head wagged to its rhythm like a metronome, and the Princesse des Laumes, to show that she was listening, beat time now and again with her fan; but, so as not to forfeit her independence, beat a different time from the musicians'. But most frequently it was to be heard in a piano arrangement played at Mme. Verdurin's for the benefit of her "little clan," which then included Odette de Crécy and, for a time, Charles Swann, by a pianist whom Madame had taken under her patronage, declaring that he left Planté and Rubinstein "sitting"; and, later, when she had become Mme. Swann, by Odette herself, when it first came to the notice of that most acute of critics, the narrator in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

But, of course, the boy, as he was then, must have heard a good deal more about the Sonata from Swann, who himself was no mean judge of music, as of painting; though, in his appreciation of the latter art, he does seem to have derived more pleasure from the discovery in an "old

master " of a likeness to one of his friends than from the aesthetic merits it might possess. But Swann's opinion of the Sonata cannot perhaps, for other reasons, be trusted altogether; it was too closely linked up in his mind with certain occurrences in his private life. Yet we can accept the favourable impression it made upon him at a time when he had not met Mme. de Crécy. On that occasion he had appreciated at first " only the material quality of the sounds which the instruments secreted. And it had been a source of keen pleasure when, below the narrow ribbon of the violin-part, delicate, unyielding, substantial, and governing the whole, he had suddenly perceived, where it was trying to surge upwards in a flowing tide of sound, the mass of the piano-part, multiform, coherent, level, and breaking everywhere in melody like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight. But at a given moment, without being able to distinguish any clear outline, or to give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly enraptured, he had tried to collect, to treasure in his memory, the phrase or harmony—he knew not which—that had just been played and had opened and expanded his soul, just as the fragrance of certain roses, wafted upon the moist air of evening, has the power to dilate our nostrils. . . . Hardly had the delicious sensation which Swann had experienced died away, before his memory furnished him with an

immediate transcript, summary, it is true, and provisional, but one on which he had kept his eyes fixed while the playing continued, so effectively that, when the same impression suddenly returned, it was no longer uncapturable. He was able to picture to himself its extent, its symmetrical arrangement, its notation, the strength of its expression; he had before him that definite object which was no longer pure music, but rather design, architecture, thought, and which allowed the actual music to be recalled. This time he had distinguished, quite clearly, a phrase which emerged for a few moments from the waves of sound. It had at once held out to him an invitation to partake of intimate pleasures, of whose existence, before hearing it, he had never dreamed, into which he felt that nothing but this phrase could initiate him; and he had been filled with love for it, as with a new and strange desire."

And, though he seems to have failed to make head or tail of the Sonata at that first hearing, that little phrase stuck in his memory. It so haunted him that, when a year later he was sitting beside Odette on Mme. Verdurin's Beauvais sofa (which his hostess vowed wasn't to be matched *anywhere*), and heard a high note held on through two whole bars, he foresaw the approach of his beloved phrase and promptly associated it with the woman at his side. In this way it became the symbol of his passion, developed into a Wagnerian *leit-motif* of his liaison with Odette, until,

when they had inevitably quarrelled, it became for him an exquisite anguish to hear. An anguish which the unhappy man had to dissemble from the ironical scrutiny of all those monocles at Mme. de Saint-Euverte's party, when "the violin had risen to a series of high notes, on which it rested as though expecting something, an expectancy which it prolonged without ceasing to hold on to the notes, in the exaltation with which it already saw the expected object approaching, and with a desperate effort . . . to keep the way open a moment longer, so that the stranger might enter in, as one holds a door open that would otherwise automatically close. And before Swann had had time to understand what was happening, to think, 'It is the little phrase from Vinteuil's Sonata. I mustn't listen!' all his memories of the days when Odette had been in love with him, which he had succeeded, up till that evening, in keeping invisible . . . had risen to sing maddeningly in his ears, without pity for his present desolation, the forgotten strains of happiness."

But we may find ample corroboration of Swann's testimony to the excellence of this work in the comments of that acute critic already mentioned. Although he has preferred to remain anonymous himself, it will be convenient for purposes of reference to find him a name, and the name which for some odd reason or other flows from my pen is "Marcel Proust." Well, this young "Proust," when he heard Mme.

Swann play the Sonata, was much impressed, though he also had some difficulty in grasping the music at first. He goes into the question much more deeply than the dilettante Swann, and begins by asking whether it is not wrong to talk about "hearing a thing for the first time," when nothing has been understood. The second and third times are from this point of view just as much "first times." Then he makes the vital discovery that probably what fails us the first time is not our intelligence but our memory. "For our memory," he says, "compared to the complexity of the impressions which it has to face while we are listening, is infinitesimal, as brief as the memory of a man who in his sleep dreams of a thousand things and at once forgets them. . . . Of these multiple impressions our memory is not capable of furnishing us with an immediate picture. But that picture gradually takes shape, and, with regard to works which we have heard two or three times, we are like the schoolboy who has read several times over before going to sleep a lesson which he supposed himself not to know, and can repeat it by heart next morning. . . . So, where Swann and his wife could make out a distinct phrase, that was as far beyond the range of my perception as a name which one tries in vain to recall. . . . And not only does one not seize at once and retain an impression of works that are really great, but even in the content of any such work (as befell

me in the case of Vinteuil's Sonata) it is the least valuable parts that one at first perceives."[1]

But "Proust" also carried away from his first hearing the recollection of a phrase; and, since it seems to have been the fate of M. Vinteuil's work to become implicated in the love affairs of its admirers, we find him at Balbec contemplating his new friend Albertine thus: "I seized the opportunity, while she stood still, to look again and discover once and for all where exactly the little mole was. Then, just as a phrase of Vinteuil which had delighted me in the Sonata, and which my recollection had allowed to wander from the *Andante* to the *Finale*, until the day when, having the score in my hands, I was able to find it, and to fix it in my memory in its proper place, in the *Scherzo*, so this mole, which I had visualised now on her cheek, now on her chin, came to rest for ever on her upper lip, just below her nose."[1]

And if again it be thought that this association of the music with the critic's sentiment may have vitiated his judgment, I can only point to the exquisite sensibility of these passages, where music is brought to the touchstone of life, and human experience, in its turn, is elucidated in terms of music. Indeed, this "Proust" shows himself preternaturally sensitive both to musical

[1] Mr. Hussey, whose essay by his kindness and Mr. Filson Young's I have been enabled to repeat from the *Saturday Review*, has, like Mr. Birrell, authorised the substitution of my version for the original text of these two quotations from *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*.—C. K. S. M.

sounds and to unorganised noises, so that he instinctively registers the pitch of a voice; so that the wall, when rapped by his grandmother, at once assumes for him the resonance of a drum, and her triple knock takes its place automatically in a symphonic scheme; so that the vision of M. de Charlus making somewhat embarrassed conversation with a new acquaintance immediately brings to his mind "those questioning phrases of Beethoven, indefinitely repeated at equal intervals, and destined, after a superabundant wealth of preparation, to introduce a new *motif*, a change of key, or a recapitulation"; and so that the old reprobate's sudden descent from high dudgeon to docility suggests the performance of "a symphony played through without a break, when a graceful *Scherzo* of idyllic loveliness follows upon the thunders of the first movement."

We cannot but regret, then, that this Sonata, which, after reading what "Proust" has to say of it, we seem to know as well as we know César Franck's or the "Kreutzer," and which has made a profound impression on persons so different in temperament as Charles Swann and Mme. Verdurin (who could not hear it without crying till she got neuralgia all down her face), should have suffered such neglect at the hands of concert-artists, whose only excuse is, presumably, to throw the blame upon the equal neglect of the publishers.

DYNELEY HUSSEY.

XVI

THE LITTLE PHRASE

MY only excuse for contributing anything to this collection is that it provides an opportunity to give some information. Readers may want to know whether the Sonata to which Proust refers in *Du Côté de chez Swann* as being played at Mme. de Saint-Euverte's party was wholly an invention of Proust's, or whether his refined and tortuous dithyrambs on the subject were inspired by an actual Sonata which the dullest may purchase at a Paris shop.

Well, the answer to this hypothetical question, like all real answers to all genuine questions, is "Yes" and "No." For the Ayes there is the statement by Proust in a letter to a friend printed in the memorial number of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*:[1] "La petite phrase de cette Sonate . . . est . . . la phrase charmante mais enfin médiocre d'une sonate pour piano et violon de Saint-Saëns. . . ."

Explosion! Thus are our idols shattered! Even Proust's deprecating "mais enfin médiocre" does not prepare for this shock the sturdy English connoisseur who likes only the best. Proust tells his friend that he can point out the precise passage, which is several times repeated; and adds

[1] *Nouvelle Revue Française*, No. 112 (N.S.), January 1923, pp. 201-2. The friend is M. Jacques de Lacretelle.—C. K. S. M.

—cunningly—that its execution was a triumph for Jacques Thibaud.

He continues that, during the same evening, when the piano and violin are described as murmuring like two birds in a dialogue, he was thinking of a sonata by Franck (especially as played by Enesco). The tremolos over the little Saint-Saëns phrase when played at the Verdurins' were, he says, suggested by the Prelude to *Lohengrin*—he does not tell us, this time, in whose rendering, but that actually they were recalled that evening by a trifle from Schubert. The same evening, he tells us, as a final scrap of information, there was played "un ravissant morceau" for the piano by Fauré.

What are we to make of all this? Well, I am struck by the composite character of Proust's material. It shows that his art consists in his power of making an exquisite synthesis of his sensibility by reprecipitating his sensations in a more generalised, more abstract form than that in which they came to him.

W. J. TURNER.

XVII

PROUST AS CREATOR[1]

. . . . . .

AS to Marcel Proust, *créateur*, I don't think he has been written about much in English, and what I have seen of it was rather superficial. I have seen him praised for his "wonderful" pictures of Paris life and provincial life. But that has been done admirably before, for us, either in love, or in hatred, or in mere irony. One critic goes so far as to say that Proust's great art reaches the universal, and that in depicting his own past he reproduces for us the general experience of mankind. But I doubt it. I admire him rather for disclosing a past like nobody else's, for enlarging, as it were, the general experience of mankind by bringing to it something that has not been recorded before. However, all that is not of much importance. The important thing is that whereas before we had analysis allied to creative art, great in poetic conception, in observation, or in style, his is a creative art absolutely based on analysis. It is really more than that. He is a writer who has pushed analysis to the point when it becomes creative. All that crowd of personages in their

[1] This is, in fact, an extract from Mr. Conrad's letter in reply to a request that he would justify the project of this volume by contributing to it.—C. K. S. M.

infinite variety through all the gradations of the social scale are rendered visible to us by the force of analysis alone. I don't say Proust has no gift of description or characterisation; but, to take an example from each end of the scale: Françoise, the devoted servant, and the Baron de Charlus, a consummate portrait—how many descriptive lines have they got to themselves in the whole body of that immense work? Perhaps, counting the lines, half a page each. And yet no intelligent person can doubt for a moment their plastic and coloured existence. One would think that this method (and Proust has no other, because his method is the expression of his temperament) may be carried too far, but as a matter of fact it is never wearisome. There may be here and there amongst those thousands of pages a paragraph that one might think over-subtle, a bit of analysis pushed so far as to vanish into nothingness. But those are very few, and all minor instances. The intellectual pleasure never flags, because one has the feeling that the last word is being said upon a subject much studied, much written about, and of human interest—the last word of its time. Those that have found beauty in Proust's work are perfectly right. It is there. What amazes one is its inexplicable character. In that prose so full of life there is no reverie, no emotion, no marked irony, no warmth of conviction, not even a marked rhythm to charm our ear. It appeals to our sense of wonder and gains our

homage by its veiled greatness. I don't think there ever has been in the whole of literature such an example of the power of analysis, and I feel pretty safe in saying that there will never be another.

. . . . . .

JOSEPH CONRAD.

XVIII

A MOMENT TO SPARE

I HAVE at last found time, or rather, for it expresses our relations better, Time has been gracious enough at last to find *me*—in regard to *Swann*. It was a new and satisfactory experience. His reality is extraordinary—at least in the main part of the book: I hope for the sake of French upper middle-class society of his day that it is not ordinary in such things as the big dinner scene in vol. ii.[1]

Has anybody said that he partakes *both* of De Quincey and of Stendhal? He does to me, and I'm shot if I ever expected to see such a blend! You see, there is in him on the one hand a double measure of the analytical and introspective power that Beyle's admirers make so much of; with what they also admire, a total absence of prettification for prettification's sake. Yet he can be pretty in the very best sense, while Beyle never can, in the best or any other. Then, too, I at least find in him much less of the type-

[1] *I.e.*, of *Du Côté de chez Swann*; the dinner at the Verdurins' at which Forcheville is present for the first time with the Cottards, Brichot the painter, Swann, and Odette. It is only fair, to both critic and reader, to explain that Mr. Saintsbury had read nothing of Proust save *Swann*, and that only in an inadequate translation. On the other hand, it was as impossible for the editor to contemplate a book of this sort without a promise of collaboration from his old friend and master as it was, at the moment, for the doyen of English (if not of European, which is to say the world's) critics to qualify himself for saying more than is printed on this leaf.—C. K. S. M.

character which, though certainly relieved by individuality in the *Chartreuse de Parme* and other books (especially *Lamiel*), is still always more or less there. But the oddest and to me the most attractive thing is the way in which he entirely relieves the sense of aridity—of museum-preparations—which I find in Stendhal. And here it is that the De Quincey suggestion comes so unexpectedly in. For Proust effects this miracle by a constant relapse upon—and sometimes a long self-restriction to—a sort of dream element. It is not, of course, the vaguer and more mystical kind that one finds in De Quincey, not that of *Our Ladies of Sorrow* or *Savannah-la-Mar*, but that of the best parts of *The English Mail Coach*. In fact, it is sometimes Landorian rather than De Quinceyish in its dreaminess. But, however this may be, the dream quality is there, to me, as it is in few other Frenchmen—themselves almost always poets. Now, the worst of the usual realist is that, being blinder than any other heathen in his blindness, he tries to exorcise dream, though sometimes not nightmare, from life. Such a mixture as Proust's I remember nowhere else.

GEORGE SAINTSBURY.

XIX

A REAL WORLD IN FICTION

MY presence among those who are offering a tribute to Marcel Proust would be an impertinence if the request for it had not been continued after I had confessed the poverty of my knowledge. As it is, I may be justified in taking the great pleasure it is to me to testify a sincere admiration, founded on howsoever little experience. I have to read a good deal for my bread, and the reading I can do for pleasure is limited by debility of eyesight; M. Proust's books are long and in a language I read less easily than my own. So it has happened that so far I have read only the two volumes of a beautifully lucid translation, wonderfully lucid when the delicacy and subtlety of the thoughts translated are considered. I will not say that you can taste a wine without drinking a bottle—the analogy, like most analogies, would be false; I do not doubt that wider study would produce more valuable opinions. Yet my slight study has produced opinions which, I am convinced, further study will only confirm, and it is a pleasure to record them. . . .

We all have our views as to what, for us, distinguishes great fiction from that which is less than great. Mine has always been that it causes me to live in a real world of visible, audible, and intelligible people—a world in which, however

novel it may be to start with, I am at home and able, with sureness, to exercise my powers of understanding to the full; this last point matters, for of course the superficial may be superficially alive. No doubt the test is objectively unfair, because the reaction of a writer's imagination on a reader's is affected, though not conditioned, as the sympathy between the two is greater or less; but for my own use this test is the most profitable. Tolstoy has done this for me, so has Sterne, so has Miss Austen, so has Thackeray, so have not very many others, and so have not some almost universally acclaimed. Well, M. Proust has done this most considerable service for me, in those two volumes I have read in translation, and I am grateful. I know his hero's grandfather and grandmother and mother and invalid aunt, and know them well, and my understanding has played with zest and to the limit of its power on the wealth of character revealed to me. M. Swann is of my intimates, and I think I have a perfect comprehension of his Odette. That is the first thing for which I am grateful. The second is the sheer intellectual joy with which, time and again, I came upon an achievement of divination in the subtleties of human emotion which caught one's breath by its compelling truth. Jealousy of a man for a woman may have been more grandly expressed, but have all the subtleties of its tortuous and agonising course ever been so completely exposed as in the case of M. Swann?

Or the feelings of a sensitive and imaginative boy in his first affections? . . . For these two things I have a sincere gratitude which I propose to increase. But the wretchedness of my present qualifications must terminate my expression of it now.

G. S. STREET.

XX

THE BIRTH OF A CLASSIC

THE pictures we make, for our own satisfaction, of our actions are generally as remote as the *clichés* of polite conversation from the psychological processes they pretend to reflect. It is convenient and very often necessary to limit consciousness of an action so that it receives a distinct and recognisable contour. With a certain resemblance to the achievement of the Impressionists, who revealed the fabric of a world worked-over with conceptual images, Proust breaks up the moulds into which our feelings are generally poured. He is curious to note the sensual deceits which agitate the mind no less profoundly than the reality would have done, and to separate the social stratagem (whether that of the Guermantes or of the servants in his own home) from the intention of which it was the paraphrase. He is dissociative only to that extent—a necessary one, since dissimulation is the mind's first nature. But he is not at all destructive; for an action never really is a separate entity, cut off by crystalline walls from the mother-liquor of our lives. In the style which he created that glittering illusion is re-dissolved into the saturated mental life of which it is an inextricable component.

I know nothing, he says, that can, "autant que le baiser, faire surgir de ce que nous croyons

une chose à aspect défini, les cent autres choses qu'elle est tout aussi bien, puisque chacune est relative à une perspective non moins légitime. . . . Dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c'est dix Albertines que je vis." Not only the coarsening of the grain of the skin seen in this unaccustomed proximity (that would be comparatively insignificant), but the psychological perspective opened by this change in their relations; though Albertine refused his kiss at Balbec, she cannot now prevent him from gathering in one embrace the rose of the past and of the present. For Albertine is not only Albertine "simple image dans le décor de la vie" when later she calls on him in Paris; her image trails the multitudinous sensations of *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*; and though he no longer loves her, the appearances she had for him at Balbec, silhouetted against the sea or sitting with her back to the cliff, bring back with them the influence of that love. We are far from what we believed a thing with a definite appearance, a girl, and perhaps the example may indicate faintly the complexity of Proust's art. Wishing to convey the shifting aspect of things, or perhaps the composite pile of aspects which represents, at any moment, our realisation of a thing —and as objective description reintroduces the pictorial *cliché* so far avoided,—he utilises the vast fabric of memory, shot, like iridescent silk, with many indefinable moods. To specify his method

more exactly would not at present be easy, nor is there any enjoyment equal to the mere following of this marvellous web into the still obscure future, where half is, to our chagrin partly and to our delight, yet hidden. To the latter, because we have to be patient against our will; to the former, because there is still so much certain pleasure in store, and the excitement of seeing the completed design, whose symmetry so far is only felt, like that of a statue in its shroud before its resurrection, coincide with or contradict our anticipations. There is a delicious state (owing not a little of its charm to our knowledge of its transience) in which a book, having shaken off the first fever of novelty, is in a condition to be most artfully savoured, and at length. The classic features will never be dearer to us than while they are still flushed with contemporaneity. The classics are at least readable in so far as they are modern, but the modern, once firmly on his pedestal, is not at all approachable. So it is a great and marvellous privilege to be awake to this exquisite dawn, at the moment this many-leaved bloom is suspended in all its freshness which to-morrow—

To-morrow will find fallen or not at all:

fallen, if the worst comes to the worst (as we have heard it always does), to a greatness in its decay and neglect more moving than the spick-and-span of a smart little subaltern of immortality.

It is impossible to imagine how this titanic fragment can be trundled from age to age; nor is the future likely to have much time to spare from the production of domestic utensils which are so badly made that they must be continually replaced. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is not one of those things which are replaced, like the novel of the moment, but exactly what part of it is most likely to be saved the present cannot decide. There will always be some to follow the whole sweep of the Master's gesture, which evokes the hours of adolescence flowering in the shade of girlhood and rebuilds the tormented cities of the plain; now stooping to dissect a snob or soaring to stroke a horizon, but never theatrical and never grandiose. Perhaps in the ray of this most intimate limelight we draw the greater part of our pleasure from the recognition of our own movements; the heirs of our sensibility will find there the original of many impulses which they accept as part of human nature.

EDGELL RICKWORD.

XXI

A CASUIST IN SOULS

PATER, who desired to find everywhere forces producing pleasurable sensations, "each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind," says: "Few artists, not Goethe nor Byron even, work quite clearly, casting off all *débris*, and leaving us only what the heat of their imagination has wholly fused and transformed." Has the heat of Proust's imagination fused and transformed his material as Balzac and Rodin transformed and fused theirs? Are his characters creations? Has he the strange magical sense of that life in natural things, which is incommunicable? I think not; there is too much *débris* in his prose which he has not cast off.

Proust's books are the autobiography of a sensitive soul, for whom the visible world exists; only, he could never say with Gautier, "I am a man for whom the visible world exists"; for in this famous phrase he expresses his outlook on life, and his view of his own work: Gautier, who literally discovered descriptive prose, a painter's prose by preference; who, in prose and in verse alike, is the poet of physical beauty, of the beauty of the exterior of things. Proust, with his adoration of beauty, gives one an equal sense of the beauty of exterior things and of physical beauty; with infinite carefulness, with

infinite precautions, he gives one glimpses of occult secrets unknown to us, of our inevitable instincts, and, at times, of those icy ecstasies which Laforgue reveals in *Moralités légendaires*. Only, not having read books of mediaeval magic, he cannot assure us that the devil's embraces are of a coldness so intense that it may be called, by an allowable figure of speech, fiery.

In his feverish attempt to explain himself to himself, his imaginary hero reminds me of Rousseau, who, having met Grimm and vexed Voltaire, was destined by his febrile and vehement character to learn in suffering what he certainly did not teach in song; who, being avid of misunderstandings, was forced by the rankling thorns of his jealousy to write his *Confessions*, in which he unburdens himself of the exasperation of all those eyes fixed upon him, driven, in spite of himself, to set about explaining himself to other people—a coward before his own conscience. There is no cowardice in the conscience of Proust's hero; his utter shameless sincerity to the naked truth of things allows him "avec une liberté d'esprit" to compete, near the end of the last volume, in his unveiling of M. de Charlus, with the outspokenness of Restif de la Bretonne in *Monsieur Nicolas*.

Some of the pages of *Sodome* might have been inspired by Petronius. The actual fever and languor in the blood: that counts for so much in Petronius's prose, and lies at the root of some

of his fascinations. He is passionately interested in people, but only in those who are not of the same nature as he is: his avid curiosity being impersonal. Some of Proust's curiosity is not so much vivid as impersonal. Petronius—like the writer I refer to—is so specifically Latin that he has no reticence in speaking of what he feels, none of that unconscious reticence in feeling which races drawn farther from civilisation have invented in their relations with nature. This is one of the things which people mean when they say that Petronius's prose is immoral. So is that of Proust. Yet, in the prose of these writers, both touched with the spirit of perversity, the rarest beauty comes from a heightening of nature into something not quite natural, a perversity of beauty, which is poisonous as well as curious.

Proust has some of the corrupt mysticism of Huysmans, but not so perilous as his; nor has he that psychology which can be carried so far into the soul's darkness that the flaming walls of the world themselves fade to a glimmer; he does not chronicle the adventures of this world's Vanity Fair: he is concerned with the revelation of the subconscious self; his hero's confessions are not the exaltation of the soul. He is concerned, not so much with adventures as with an almost cloistral subtlety in regard to the obscure passions which work themselves out, never with any actual logic. With all his curiosity, this

curiosity never drives him in the direction of the soul's apprehension of spiritual things. He does, at times, like Mallarmé, deform ingeniously the language he writes in; and, as in most of these modern decadents, perversity of form and perversity of manner bewilder us in his most bewildering pages.

I find to my surprise that a French critic, Carcassonne, compares Proust with Balzac. As an observer of society, yes; as a creator, no. "Never," he writes, "since Stendhal and Balzac has any novelist put so much reality into a novel. Stendhal, Balzac: I write those great names without hesitation beside that of Marcel Proust. It is the finest homage I can render to the power and originality of his talent." During Balzac's lifetime there was Benjamin Constant, whose *Adolphe* has its place after *Manon Lescaut*, a purely objective study of an incomparable simplicity, which comes into the midst of those analysts of difficult souls—Laclos, who wrote an unsurpassable study of naked human flesh in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; Voltaire, Diderot; Rousseau, in whose *Nouvelle Héloïse* the novel of passion comes into existence. After these Flaubert, the Goncourts, Huysmans, Zola, Maupassant. I should place Proust with those rare spirits whose *métier* is the analysis of difficult souls. Browning wrote in regard to his *Sordello*: "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study; I, at

least, always thought so." This certainly applies to Proust; and, as he seems to me to derive some of his talent from Stendhal and from no other novelist, I can imagine his casuistical and cruel creation of the obscure soul of M. de Charlus in much the same fashion as Stendhal's when he undresses Julien Sorel's soul with a deliberate and fascinating effrontery.

Consider the question of Balzac's style: you will find that it has life, that it has idea, that it has variety; that there are moments when it attains a rare and perfectly individual beauty. To Baudelaire he was a passionate visionary. "In a word, every one in Balzac, down to the very scullions, has genius." I have often wondered whether, in the novel, perfect form is a good or even a possible thing if the novel is to be what Balzac made it, history added to poetry. A novelist with style will not look at life with an entirely naked vision.

There is no naked vision in Proust; his vision is like a clouded mirror, in whose depths strange shapes flash and vanish. The only faultless style in French is Flaubert's; that style, which has every merit and hardly a fault, becomes what it is by a process very different from that of most writers careful of form. I cannot deny that Stendhal has a sense of rhythm: it is in his brain rather than in his dry imagination; in a sterile kind of brain, set at a great distance from the heart, whose rhythm is too faint to disturb

it. Still, in Proust's style there is something paradoxical, singular, caustic; it is coloured and perfumed and exotic, a style in which sensation becomes complex, cultivated, the flower of an elaborate life; it can become deadly, as passion becomes poisonous. "The world of the novelist," I have written, "what we call the real world, is a solid theft out of space; colour and music may float into it and wander through it, but it has not been made with colour and music, and it is not a part of the consciousness of its inhabitants." This world was never lived in by d'Annunzio; this world was never entered by Proust. All the same, there is in him something cruel, something abnormal, something subtle. He is a creator of gorgeous fabrics, Babylons, Sodoms. Only, he never startles you, as Balzac startles you.

ARTHUR SYMONS.

XXII

THE LAST WORD

TWO of the contributors to the stout Proust memorial number of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* remind me that I met Marcel Proust many years ago at a Christmas Eve party given by Madame Edwards (now Madame José Sert) in her remarkable flat on the Quai Voltaire, Paris. (Not that I needed reminding.) With some eagerness I turned up the year, 1910, in my journal. What I read there was this: "Doran came on Sunday night for dinner. We went on to Misia Edwards' 'Réveillon,' and got home at 4 A.M." Not a word more! And I cannot now remember a single thing that Proust said.

I have, however, a fairly clear recollection of his appearance and style: a dark, pale man, of somewhat less than forty, with black hair and moustache; peculiar; urbane; one would have said, an aesthete; an ideal figure, physically, for Bunthorne; he continually twisted his body, arms, and legs into strange curves, in the style of Lord Balfour as I have observed Lord Balfour in the restaurants of foreign hotels. I would not describe him as self-conscious; I would say rather that he was well aware of himself. Although he had then published only one book, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*—and that fourteen years before—and although the book had had no popular success,

Proust was undoubtedly in 1910 a considerable lion. He sat at the hostess's own table and dominated it, and everybody at the party showed interest in him. Even I was somehow familiar with his name. As for *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, I have not read it to this day.

A few weeks before his death, while searching for something else in an overcrowded bookcase, I came across my first edition of *Du Côté de chez Swann*, and decided to read the book again. I cared for it less, and I also cared for it more, than in 1913. The *longueurs* of it seemed to me to be insupportable, the clumsy centipedalian crawling of the interminable sentences inexcusable; the lack of form or construction may disclose artlessness, but it signifies effrontery too. Why should not Proust have given himself the trouble of learning to "write," in the large sense? Further, the monotony of subject and treatment becomes wearisome. (I admit that it is never so distressing in *Swann* as in the later volumes of *Guermantes* and of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.) On the other hand, at the second reading I was absolutely enchanted by some of the detail.

About two-thirds of Proust's work must be devoted to the minutiæ of social manners, the rendering ridiculous of a million varieties of snob. At this game Proust is a master. (Happily he does not conceal that, with the rest of mankind, he loves ancient blood and distinguished connections.) He will write you a hundred pages

about a fashionable dinner at which nothing is exhibited except the littleness and the *naïveté* of human nature. His interest in human nature, if intense and clairvoyant, is exceedingly limited. Foreign critics generally agree that the English novelist has an advantage over the French in that he walks all round his characters and displays them to you from every side. I have heard this over and over again in conversation in Paris, and I think it is fairly true, though certainly Balzac was the greatest exponent of complete display. Proust never "presents" a character; he never presents a situation: he fastens on one or two aspects of a character or a situation, and strictly ignores all the others. And he is scarcely ever heroical, as Balzac was always; he rarely exalts, and he nearly always depreciates—in a tolerant way.

Again, he cannot control his movements: he sees a winding path off the main avenue, and scampers away further and further and still further, merely because at the moment it amuses him to do so. You ask yourself: He is lost—will he ever come back? The answer is that often he never comes back, and when he does come back he employs a magic but illicit carpet, to the outrage of principles of composition which cannot be outraged in a work of the first order. This animadversion applies not only to any particular work, but to his work as a whole. The later books are orgies of self-indulgence; the

work has ruined the *moral* of the author: phenomenon common enough.

Two achievements in Proust's output I should rank as great. The first is the section of *Swann* entitled *Un amour de Swann*. He had a large theme here—love and jealousy. The love is physical and the object of it contemptible; the jealousy is fantastic. But the affair is handled with tremendous, grave, bitter, impressive power. The one fault of it is that he lets Swann go to a *soirée musicale* and cannot, despite several efforts, get him away from it in time to save the interest of the situation entire. Yet in the *soirée musicale* divagation there are marvellous, inimitable things.

The second achievement, at the opening of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, is the psychological picture of the type-pederast. An unpromising subject, according to British notions! Proust evolves from it beauty, and a heartrending pathos. Nobody with any perception of tragedy can read these wonderful pages and afterwards regard the pervert as he had regarded the pervert before reading them. I reckon them as the high-water of Proust.

Speaking generally, Proust's work declined steadily from *Swann*. *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* was a fearful fall, and as volume followed volume the pearls were strung more and more sparsely on the serpentine string. That Proust was a genius is not to be doubted; and I agree

that he made some original discoveries in the by-ways of psychological fiction. But that he was a supreme genius, as many critics both French and English would have us believe, I cannot admit.

ARNOLD BENNETT.

THE END

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